

“Back to the Garden”

by Betsey Newenhuyse

Happy Earth Day! Right now, it's the best of times, it's the worst of times.

It's the best because in Chicago we're actually having a real spring—mild, green, bloomy, enough sun but not too dry. There are dazzling white trees all over town, from my sleepy village to the Moody campus to city sidewalks, busy sidewalks. I think they're pears. As previously noted, the robins returned in March and are now everywhere in our neck of the woods, trees, lawns, even in the road – when we drive down our street we have to swerve to avoid hitting them. They start singing, almost screaming, in the dark at 5 in the morning. Right now, the robins are kind of running the show out our way. The peepers, tiny frogs, are trilling in the streams and marshes and even in random puddles. The air is balmy, the wind gentle and whispery. Sunset lingers – unlike in winter when all of a sudden bam! the sun sinks as though it wants to hurry away before it catches cold.

And it's gardening time. Which brings me to the “worst” of it.

I love gardening. Well, let me amend that. A famous author once said that he didn't love writing; he loved “having written.” I love “having gardened.” The beds all tidy and weeded, the flowers and shrubs and ornamental grasses all springing up, the grass as velvety as Augusta National. Then I can sit on my patio, which itself has been swept and tidied and adorned with flowers in colorful pots, and read the Sunday New York Times and breathe in the fragrance of a freshly mowed expanse.

And I love to look at photos of award-winning gardens in our local paper, these lush oases, some in the middle of the city. But what they don't show is what comes first: years of flat-out, sweat-dripping toil that breaks the back and the bank. So right now it isn't “having gardened,” it's “have to” garden. At this beautiful time of year, *everything* needs doing. My honey-do list is as long as a roll of Charmin. The other evening Fritz and Lucy the dog and I were out, strolling our grounds, and I kept pointing: See where the grass is growing into the flowers! I hate that bush and we should take it out! Over there, what if we . . .

The *most* fun, of course, is the buying. We make an outing of it, visiting real garden centers and wandering the tempting displays, pulling our little wagon behind us and loading up with pansies and daisies and purple fountain grass and bags of mulch and look at this cute little stone bunny! As the old saying goes, a little here, a little there and pretty soon you're talking about real money. Contrary to popular belief, gardening is NOT cheap. Let's just say you do it for the non-material rewards.

One of those rewards, for Fritz and me, is spending time together as husband and wife. Fritz, being Dutch, loves working the land almost as much as he loves staying out of debt. He has a sure and gentle touch with all growing things; it's fascinating to watch as he kneels and scoops

and handles tiny seeds and tender leaves. I can get down and dirty, too, but I'm more the visionary who maps out landscaping ideas and says, "Put the hole *there*." Fritz just loves touching stuff. I love conceptualizing stuff. Somehow it works.

And there's one thing we've done that has practically saved our marriage. If you and your spouse have lawn fights, I have one word for you: *Hire*. Joe's a nice young local entrepreneur, went to high school with our daughter, great worker. He does some other heavy-duty landscaping work for us too, and it's been a huge help.

But tomorrow – which is Saturday as I'm taping this – we're on our own. In the yard. On our knees. . . which, somehow, fits. For Prime Time America, this is Betsey Newenhuyse. For Moody Radio, this is Betsey Newenhuyse.