

## The Gardener

ALEXANDER FORBES

I had just moved to the area when first I met him. The hour was one in which reasonable, productive members of society are readying themselves for the day ahead; in my case, a morning jog. Lest you be shocked by this admission, I can justify such frivolity through the knowledge that maintaining a certain level of fitness is crucial to achieving one's goals both professional and personal. I still manage to arrive at work early, and find myself in a much more efficient frame of mind. But even children are educated in the basic facts of output maximisation, which is perhaps why this strange man so surprised me.

That first day I continued jogging, unsure of what to make of what I had just seen. I remarked upon the fact to my wife, who was quite rightly taken aback.

"But darling," she said, "are you certain that's what you saw? You must have passed so quickly. Perhaps it was simply a mistake."

Perhaps, indeed! I hoped as much.

Being so new to the area I was still experimenting with the most efficient route for my morning jog. To my shame, I had already determined that this strange man's street was not the most efficient path, but that wily devil we call curiosity lured me to proceed once more past his property.

There could be no doubt, the second time I saw him, that the previous day's actions had been no coincidence.

I stopped in front of his gate and stared at the outrageous spectacle unfolding before me. The man knelt by a garden bed, laying mulch around three freshly-planted bushes. The bushes were all different, and I noticed that in his yard he had quite the assortment of trees and plants, none of which I recognised. There was no order to the yard at all, and it was not particularly beautiful, either: the gardening work was of an unprofessional nature. Then this strange man, this amateur gardener, caught me staring.

I was startled, but he did not reprimand me. Rather, he waved briefly and smiled. I gave a polite but hesitant response in kind, bearing in mind that I was new in this neighbourhood; perhaps it was generally known that this house was to be avoided. What if somebody saw me? Would they think me supportive of such behaviours? Worse, even: that I engage in them!

I was already unaccustomed enough to being greeted with a wave, but the man then spoke to me. Madness! We didn't know each other at all!

There is a certain order to social interaction. One cannot flout convention, even if one's interlocutor flouts it so openly, thus I could not withhold my own greeting and thereby risk developing a reputation as a rude man, so I responded in kind.

Well, now I was really stuck. He must have taken this as some sort of invitation, and made a comment about the weather; I make no joke, he commented on the weather! I mumbled some kind of agreement and began to recover my senses.

"What is it that you're doing there?" I asked, doing my best to mask any hint of overtly disapproving curiosity in my attempt to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"I'm gardening," he said.

I stared at him. "Sorry?"

It was almost scandalous. Possibly heretical. I thought for a moment he might be joking, but there was nothing on his face nor in his body that suggested so. To admit such disgraceful behaviour so openly, with not one skerrick of shame!

"I'm gardening," he said again. "I find it very relaxing."

I could almost have collapsed.

"But why?" I asked. I couldn't help my curiosity at such an admission. Of all the things one could do with their time; it was absurd!

"I enjoy the sunshine," he said, "and the fresh air. The weather here is very pleasant. You don't enjoy being outside?"

The man had obviously misunderstood my question. I wanted to know why he wasted his precious time gardening, not inanities about the environment.

"I go outside when I need to," I said, generous in my willingness to meet him half way. "But only when I need to." One must be careful not to be seen as lazy, though the man seemed unfazed by the notion that he could be seen in such a way.

"Oh, I come outside as much as I can," he said. "I couldn't imagine myself stuck inside all day."

My wife would have fainted at such an admission, I'm sure of it!

"And what do you do for relaxation?" he asked.

"I don't understand what you mean," I said. "You mean when I'm not working at full productivity?"

He smiled a little lopsidedly. "Sure."

I glanced around, conscious of whether or not anyone was watching my exchange with the man.

"Well, I read a little," I admitted carefully. "Only important

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articles, though. Very occasionally a book. To make sure I'm not outskilled at work, you see. And I watch the news, of course; one must keep up to date with the latest developments."

"Yes, I see," he said. "One must."

A realisation then dawned on me. "Are you an investor?" I asked. "You own some business? Property?" Yes, that made sense. Already I felt flooding relief that I had solved the mystery of his wasted effort.

But the man just smiled and shook his head. "I have no time for such things. I prefer the real world."

He indicated to his garden.

"Sorry, perhaps I'm not understanding," I said. "What exactly is the function of your garden?"

"It pleases me," he said.

I waited for something grander, but was unrewarded.

"Is it for food?" I pressed. "There must be some explanation for this."

He pointed to other parts of his property. "I have potatoes over there. And carrots. Some onions and various herbs. A plum tree that never does very well, and a mulberry bush. That always does well. It attracts the birds, too, though I have native flowers in the back for that. I do like to eat the few things I can grow, but I'm not self-sufficient by any means. I just enjoy the process."

I stared at him as he admired his time sink, and began to understand that this man was truly lost to any civilised behaviour and standards. I had already spent too long there, but I couldn't allow him to escape so easily from a proper judgment of his blasphemous lifestyle. It is incumbent upon us all, after all, to set on the correct path all those who do not fully participate in the real world.

"Now look," I said. "This is quite enough. I've never heard such nonsense in my life. Potatoes? Why on earth would you grow potatoes? You're not a farmer. You don't have the right skillset or resources to scale your production. You should be maximally participating in the economy like the rest of us!"

"I prefer to participate in my garden," he said with a smile. "And I enjoy eating my own potatoes."

"But can't you see? Can't you see that this is inefficient? Surely there is something else you could do with your time that would maximise your output. Then you could buy all the potatoes you need and have money left over! I cannot fathom how you cannot understand such basic facts of life."

The man only shrugged, and went back to his mulching. "Aren't you worried that talking to me is an inefficient use of your time?" he asked.

I sensed something sarcastic in his tone of voice, though it was clear to me by now that he had no right to take such an attitude against those of us who lived a proper life. The nerve of him! In any case, he was quite right about the more valuable activities my time could be spent on. I took one last look at his garden of wasted labour and, shaking my head, continued on my way.

For several weeks this encounter troubled me. My wife was suitably mortified when I told her and, lest she become distressed, forbade me ever to speak of it again. Even now my blood speeds on recollection of the experience. I cannot help wishing I had looked one last time at the strange man, just to be certain of whether or not I had truly seen a smile on his face as I left. Perhaps that is what infuriates me the most: the satisfaction he derived from such useless, non-contributing behaviour.

But some people cannot be saved from themselves.

I have made sure never to traverse the strange man's street again, though every so often I feel a tingling curiosity to visit him and see if his garden has progressed. I never falter, though, and he has even inspired me to further productivity, as though I can make up for the non-participation of a stranger.

When I look back on such encounters, I can do nothing else but shake my head. Some people will never understand.

#### Author

Alexander Forbes is a writer and teacher living in Melbourne. He works as a Learning Advisor for international students studying at Southern Cross University

## GALLERY

Pages 70, 73-74: Photographic transfer prints, exhibited at the Regional Marks Print Exhibition, celebrating 50 years of print at the University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery 19 May-2 July, 2016. Held in the University of the Sunshine Coast permanent collection. Photography by Debra Livingston.

#### NURTURE/NATURE

The work explores the metaphorical balance between death and renewal that exists in nature. Nature undergoes a perpetual transformation where everything derived from nature is subject to the same repetitive cycle of growth and decay—of life and death. To nurture is perhaps alien to many living busy lives in the city. It is important to acknowledge the various species that live in our gardens.

Sarzynski (2018) discusses nurture in nature and suggests that we give nature (species) a monetary value as he considers that our current world 'people calculate and plan everything to increase self-benefits and reduce self-harm' and therefore would perhaps value an animal's distinction based on cost.

The following digital image transfer prints reveal the beauty that result from decay and asks the viewer to question their own perception of the world around them and how we should nurture nature.

#### References

Sarzynski T. 2018 'Caring for Nature to be Happy, Environmental Ideas', *Medium* <https://medium.com/environmental-intelligence/caring-nature-to-be-happyd1b392444e58> (accessed 15/01/2019).