

Bad Year For Tomatoes

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It was a bad year for tomatoes—and everything else it seems. I'm not just talking garden, though it had its share of bad news: no blueberries this year, no plums, no apples. The pumpkins came out the size of tennis balls and something bored holes in them as they lay on the ground. Birds picked the strawberries, slugs ambushed the lettuce, and squirrels and chipmunks flung dirt out of my pots on the deck in an effort to hide their bounty. Summer arrived in July and rain started in September, so there went the season. The deer did the final number on the garden by nipping off all the new rosebuds and devouring the geraniums. Add in the daily trashing of the compost heap by raccoons—well, you get the picture. It's a wonder any of us gardeners keep on keepin' on.

Besides the disasters in the garden, the longer any of us live, the greater the losses. Everything on the body seems to go south. If it isn't flexibility, memory, joints, or the spring in our step, it's the diminishment of our vision and strong teeth. Family, friends and teachers pass on, leaving us behind and bereft. Our longtime pet companions go as well and before you know it, we're facing a large mound of what feels like ungrieved losses. Sometimes we even have to accept the unthinkable in whatever violent form it takes, somehow wrap our minds around it and still go on even when we have no answers.

In the nick of time, along comes October, a month for changing gears. The change in the air feels mysterious and exciting like something's coming but we don't know what. Leaves change colors, show us their glory, then drift earthward to nourish the soil; light and shadow constantly shift as the sun creeps southward for winter. Shorter days, cooler nights. Deck dining turns to fireside chats and roasted vegetables in the oven. Some of us sign up for classes to learn a new skill or return to an exercise program. Some rearrange furniture, take down the summer curtains, substitute heavier drapes. We plant more daffodils and tulips, then put the garden to bed, but come November, we're lost once again in the dream as seed catalogs arrive. We stack the firewood, stock the pantry with comfort food, and get ready for what's next. We might tackle a new project in earnest, take on a different job, or with renewed effort become part of some cause or movement.

As we approach November, that time of year when we traditionally set aside time to gather together with family and friends and acknowledge what we're grateful for, I decide to begin my gratitude list early. I need the early reminder this year. I'm thankful that my longtime friend, Mrs. Smith, celebrates her 90th birthday this month and continues to send me handwritten letters as she's done for forty years. I celebrate the joy of attending my first grandson's upcoming birthday, five years since his rocky start. With Women For Women International, I commemorate the graduation from a jobs skills program of a woman I've supported for years in a war-torn developing country. I savor the memory of summer trips to the beautiful regions of the North Cascades and

Eastern Oregon. I relish the friendship of my neighbor's dog, Bailey, as we sit by the creek and he slobbers me with wet kisses. Hoorah! I say to the pink lily that finally blooms in the greenhouse after six months of coaxing. A new friend comes along; I receive a good doctor report. Whatever it is that brings joy, I take it all. The Burgess writing group continues--we know Michael is cheering us on; the Meditation and Art class has their first gallery showing at NCRD, an explosion of vibrant color and pure joy. The choir at St. Catherine's prepares music for Advent. Life renews once again.

As I change gears and get ready for another winter, I pause and ask myself the question posed by poet Mary Oliver, one I've often asked of my students: What is it that you want to do with the one, wild, precious thing called your life?