

# *Itching Time*

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It's itching time. No, I'm not talking allergies. After months of rain in the Pacific Northwest, we gardener types are itching to dig in the dirt, itching to plant something, itching to cruise around the nurseries touching the plants even when we know it's too early and the soil is too cold. I have to fight to keep my car on the road each time I pass a nursery, and most of the time I can't resist just stopping in for a look.

Knowing heat units are everything, I envision a new spot for the garden this year where I'll have optimum sunlight. I peruse books on growing your own food in hard times and dream of rows of healthy vegetables. Maybe I'll put more plants on the east upper deck away from the critters. I'll get two more window boxes for the south side and grow my herbs there. The main garden will have to be fenced this year. I'm not planting a thing, I tell my husband, until I know my little darlings will be safe from deer, raccoons, and squirrels.

Everywhere I look, it's spring. Coal Creek rushes and tumbles on its course and skunk cabbage strut their stuff in the wetlands alongside. Creamy white trilliums dot the hillside behind my house in exactly the same spot they do every year. Wild irises along the brook lift their heads upward. I wonder about my young Arizona grandsons who fixate on computer screens, virtual gardens and farms, dragons and swords when outside their window, springtime in the desert abounds in all its glory.

Spring comes, and with it a healthy dose of hope just when we need it. Those of us in our autumn years seem faced with loss at every turn. Friends move on, the lives of others come to their close, our pets leave us. Even my drop-by dog pals are dwindling. Last week when Leche, the neighbor's Great Pyrenees showed up, I was ecstatic and gave him hugs and kisses and biscuits galore. Little gifts—I look for them each day. After a long winter's slog, the sunny daffodils rise up to sway in the breeze once again, while nearby red-cupped tulips looking like a bouquet of exquisite small bowls vie for attention as if to say, "look at me, look at me!" Clinging to the words of Anne Frank, "I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles," I walk around the yard, through the woods, along the creek, noticing everything, practicing gratitude.

When I left the Northwest earlier this year for my hiatus in the Sonoran desert, it was winter. The crisp green Christmas wreath still hung by my front door. The tulip bulbs I'd planted

nestled deep in their pots on the patio where I covered them with heavy rocks to keep the squirrels out. When I returned, a couple months later, I had to turn over three pages of the calendar, the brown and withered wreath was hanging by a thread, and the tulips were pushing and struggling to get out from under the rocks. Spring comes and the grass grows by itself. Life goes on and in the midst of it is the gift of rebirth.

I content myself with re-potting geraniums in the greenhouse, clipping and pruning shrubs, sketching out the new garden. I pay closer attention to the natural world around me--new calves in the pasture, the hummingbird that returns to where I had the feeder last year, the cherry tree on the North Fork Road, bent and split, but still holding forth a blossoming beacon of hope. I ponder the words I saw on a reader board in Rockaway Beach, "Don't let your spring break." I agree. It's fragile and precious, this season of renewal, and it shouldn't be taken for granted. It's a lifeline to our summer still on the horizon, a bridge that will take us onward to whatever comes next.