

Nature in the Neighborhood – March 2023

Getting Your Hands Dirty

The love of dirt is among the earliest of passions. ... Mud-pies gratify one of our first and best instincts ... Fondness of the ground comes back to a man after he has run the round of pleasure and business, eaten dirt, and sown wild-oats, drifted about the world and taken the wind of all its moods ...

-- Charles Dudley Warner, *My Summer in a Garden* (1870)

I picked up Mr. Warner's pocket-sized gardening memoir at either a garage sale or flea market and was instantly charmed by these opening lines. Progressing through the summer season, his memoir is full of advice for the home gardener ("*if you want anything to come to maturity early [in New England], you must start it in a hot-house*"), as well as a bit of philosophy ("*so long as we are dirty, we are pure*").

Unfortunately, while toiling to own a piece of land, many people never get their hands dirty toiling its soil. Someone else is hired to do that. A landscaping company comes once a week to mow, fertilize, mulch, plant, trim, prune, and noisily (and unnecessarily) blow leaves around.

And this is unfortunate because, to quote Mr. Warner, "*[t]here is a great pleasure in working in the soil, apart from the ownership of it ... [i]t is a pleasure to eat the fruit of one's toil, if it be nothing more than a head of lettuce or an ear of corn.*"

Living in the late 1800s, Mr. Warner's gardening interest was primarily in growing fruit and vegetables - but then, the world he lived in was mostly rural. Sprawling suburbanization had not yet arrived and had not yet resulted in the loss of millions of acres of farmland and of ecologically productive habitat. (It's estimated that highly manicured lawns now cover a whooping 40 million acres across the country.) I'm pretty sure that if Mr. Warner lived today, this would concern him and he'd be an advocate -- as

many are now -- for planting gardens filled with native species (that is, species that occurred within this region before European settlement). These natives are plants that Mr. Warner would have been familiar with as they would not yet have been crowded out by invasive species such as Oriental bittersweet, Japanese knotweed, and winged euonymus (aka "Burning Bush").

If you're interested in learning more about the importance of native plants, the Swampscott Conservancy hosted a talk by Doug Tallamy, an American entomologist, ecologist and conservationist, which is on Conservancy's YouTube page at youtube.com/channel/UCC6texTfvivMIq6U40e6d2A

And if you're interested in getting your hands dirty this year planting a native garden, we hope to see you at the Conservancy's annual June native plant sale at the Swampscott Farmer's Market at a date to be announced.

Why wouldn't one want to get his or her hands dirty? To toil his or her own soil? There may be more than one reason but the most common is that we just don't have the time. We have busy lives with overextended schedules and no time to tend a garden. We have more conveniences than those living in Mr. Warner's time but, paradoxically, we seem to have less time. But do we lose something important by not taking the time and heeding Mr. Warner's advice to "*plant seeds and watch their renewal of life?*"

The mental health benefits of spending time in nature have been recognized for centuries and modern studies just keep confirming it. And then there are the physical benefits. The CDC recommends 2.5 hours a week of moderate intensity level activity - and happily gardening falls into that category -- to reduce the risks for obesity, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease. And if the benefits of mental and physical health aren't enough of a reason, consider the money saved in not having to hire that landscaper- or paying gym fees.

Some of us, however, may just be fearful that our attempts at gardening will fail. Here, Mr. Warner's counsel is well worth taking: *"Hoe while it is spring, and enjoy the best anticipations. It is not much matter if things do not turn out well."*

Happy Gardening in the Neighborhood.

Toni Bandrowicz, President
Swampscott Conservancy