

My Wandering Jew had a Nervous Breakdown

I don't have a green thumb. Moreover, my plants know it: they lie down and die right in front of my very eyes. It was not always so. I once had plants in every room. On the windowsill was a blooming begonia. In the corner of the living room, in direct sunlight was a fuchsia so stunning, my husband paid more attention to it than he did to me. We kept plants all over the house in places one would never suspect. In the bathroom, a potted palm that thrived on showers, peered down at my naked body like a voyeur.

Then, I got lazy. I resented treating my plants like children. I never baby talked to my kids and I refused to stoop to this level with my Anthurium and African Violets. I felt ridiculous humming tunes like "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" or reciting passages from How Green was my Valley which, I was told would add years to a plant's life.

"If you're good to your plants, your plants will be good to you," the man at the nursery told me.

My dental hygienist said that plants enjoy poetry readings and need to be cleaned regularly.

So, I flossed their stems and began reading verse. My Gesneriads are particularly fond of Keats while my Fittonia is a devotee of Longfellow. But, nothing much happened.

I really began thinking the world was crazy when my best friend revealed a well-kept secret: For years she had performed the soliloquy from McBeth in front of her Strelitzia.

"These plants were raised on culture and intellect," she said. "My little Narcissus thrives on the classics.

I went home and read the entire first act of Romeo and Juliet to my Geranium. It didn't seem to care. I got so mad, I spritzed it with water until it required CPR.

"Plants are like pets," my veterinarian told me after I had admired his Yucca tree."

"If you take on the responsibility of owning them, you must treat them with the kindness and respect they deserve. Care for them as you would a cat."

I put a bowl of Friskies in front of my Schefflera and hoped for the best.

But, my heart wasn't in it and my plants, knowing that, refused to grow. I was guilty of the worst possible gardening crime: plant neglect.

Then, one day when every plant in the house had drooped, I decided to mend my ways. I stocked up on plant care books and threw a little sugar and honey into their water to sweeten their roots. My Petunias went into a diabetic coma.

After that, I devoted my entire life to the care and nurturing of my Fuchsia and Freesia. I gave up visits with my friends to stay home and have tea with my Philodendron.

“You look divine,” I told it, offering it a scone.

And the Philodendron, knowing I was lying through my teeth, withered at my feet.

Despite my poor success rate, I continued to try. I talked to them, smiled at them and fondled every leaf. Hearing that light is a plant’s bread, I put my Purple-Passion vine in a candle- lighted room and whispered sweet nothings into its stems. By the end of the month it had croaked. The others looked ready for Intensive Care.

“Buy a cactus,” my friend suggested. “They’re maintenance-free.”

“What! And be pricked to death by an irate Echinopsis?” I said.

“You need to develop a plant attitude,” my neighbor Cynthia. A plan aficionado, told me. “Think green!”

She took me for a stroll through her backyard which resembles the Botanical Gardens.

“Some people simply cannot make things grow no matter how hard they try,” Cynthia said.

I stood there feeling morose and forlorn while Cynthia planted a kiss on her Azela bush.

“Some folks,” she continued, “are better at others kinds of endeavors, like cooking, for instance.”

I mentally reviewed the last good meal I had cooked. That was in 1999. If I recall, my guests left early due to severe indigestion.

Then, one afternoon I received a call from a friend who was leaving on a two-week vacation.

“Do me a favor,” she said. “Could you tend my plants while I’m away?”

“Define tend,” I said.

“Just come in and check on them every few days and give them water when their pots are dry.”

Dare I tell her that if I as much as glance at a plant, it might expire right on the spot?

When I agreed, her “must-do” list got longer. “You should also give them a dollop of plant food, half an aspirin mixed in some sugar, and most importantly, talk to them for 10-minutes. They thrive on banter.”

So, every afternoon, I went to her house and told her plants some of my best jokes. I also sang a few bars of “My Wild Irish Rose.” Miraculously, they survived.

After a while, I couldn’t handle the whole affair. I was a plant dropout. I decided to farm out my plants to family members. I gave my daughter most of them, thinking that being around my grandchildren would breathe new life into my plants’ veins. Instead, my Wandering Jew had a nervous breakdown.

I’ve been without them for a while now and I’ve begun to go into plant withdrawal. Frankly, I miss my potted pals who once added color to my life. Last week, I went out and bought a prickly

cactus to keep me company. It sits in the sun all day minding its own business. The two of work well together: I don't touch it and it ignores me.