

FINDING JOY AND MAKING THE MOST OF MARCH

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The early days of March are a challenging time for gardeners. We are anxious to get busy outside but the ground is too damp and cold to be worked without damaging the soil structure. Luckily, there is a new way to channel that enthusiasm and get prepared for the growing season ahead. This year, I am applying the life changing magic of Marie Kondo and asking myself, “What sparks joy?”

For the uninitiated, the KonMari organizational method gently suggests that you assess belongings according to how they make you feel. If they make you happy when held, they stay; everything else is thanked and tossed. You group like items together (i.e. magazines, pots, potting materials, tools, etc.). Sort and handle one category at a time, beginning with the easiest and ending those holding the most emotional attachments.

A good place to start is with plastic nursery pots. Since gardeners tend to buy a lot of plants and save everything, it is a safe bet that, like me, you have an enormous supply of these. Gather them all up and ask yourself how many do you really need? If they are made of polypropylene #5, as many are, they can be recycled in Frederick County.

Next, how about that collection of garden gloves with holes in the fingers? Is it time to acknowledge that they served you well and to bid them a sincere goodbye? And how many outdated seed packets do you have? What about last year’s catalogs? Organizing and clearing out items in the shed or on the potting bench will leave you with more room and make it easier to find what you need but these tasks are really just a warm up for the main event. Tackling plant categories is where the going gets tough.

Nurturers by definition, gardeners have a hard time giving up on a plant but sometimes that’s exactly what needs to happen. Begin indoors and, again, start with the least difficult decisions. If a plant is dead or dying—it is best to admit it, remove it, and move on. While I have absent-mindedly pondered the tricky feat of keeping poinsettias alive and thriving from one holiday season to the next in the mid-Atlantic, the one I purchased in November is down to its last few leaves. Is it headed for the compost pile? Maybe, like a sillier-than-serious-me friend of mine, you have philodendron affectionately named Bob, who is alive but not thriving. She can take cuttings from Bob to start a new plant.

Once you finish organizing your plants inside but the ground is still too wet to be worked in your garden beds, consider making mental lists of which outdoor plants can stay and which may need to go. Give priority to the “safety concern” category. For instance, if a tree has a lot of dead branches, large cracks in the bark, and/or a noticeably thinning canopy, have it evaluated by an arborist. It could be hazardous and may need to come down.

Sometimes you have the right plant but it is in the wrong place. A dogwood growing in the deep shade won’t bloom well if at all. An oak sapling planted close to a house foundation will soon outgrow the space. The roots of yarrow in a damp spot will rot. If plants are small enough, many can be moved to more favorable locations in the spring or fall. Even small trees can be root pruned and transplanted successfully given enough time, muscle, and post-move watering.

Then there is the high maintenance/low value category of plants. Old fashion bearded irises are spectacular in bloom for about 10 days mid-Spring. The rest of the year the leaves are ragged and the rhizomatous roots grow quickly and need to be divided every other year to ensure flowering. Are they worth the effort? Siberian irises have equally gorgeous blooms and their grass-like foliage is lush from spring to fall. There is also a new variety of bearded iris that re-blooms- yes, twice in one year. Perhaps, it is time to dig up those roots once and for all and replace them with better performers.

True to the Konmari way, I saved the most difficult plant decision for last. What do you do about a plant that is a beauty to behold but an environmental menace? A number of ornamental trees, shrubs, vines and perennials imported from overseas over the decades are now known to be invasive. Vigorous growers and free from the pests and competitors that slow them down in their native lands, they tend to escape home gardeners and take over wild areas pushing out more beneficial native plants thus limiting the food supply for native insects and birds. The place favorites like sweet smelling Asian honeysuckle or the fall landscape stunner burning bush hold in your heart has to be weighed against the larger damage they cause.

In the end, the Marie Kondo philosophy is not all about getting rid of things. It is about acknowledging and caring only for things you value. When I first moved to Maryland, my father gave me several massive clumps of dark, fleshy peony roots he unearthed from the century old garden beds of my childhood home. These heirlooms have moved with me three times and are now planted in a barely adequate slice of sunshine in my otherwise shady yard. I am lucky to get even a few small blooms each year but they serve to remind me of the armful of peony flowers--wondrously fluffy, fragrant, and pink--that my dad would wrap in damp newspaper and bring to me on June visits as well as our shared love of gardening. Wrong place, low yield, outdated variety--but do they ever spark joy!

The poinsettia can go but the peonies stay.



The last bunch of peonies I got from Dad.
I am so glad I took a picture.

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