

# How to Garden Without Killing

Story and Pictures by Victoria Rainone

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Most of my life I have done some form of gardening. And organic gardening would be the natural way to go, right? But I soon realized that if “organic” means introducing “beneficial” insects, which would dispatch other insects regarded as pests, that is still killing. For me, as a Buddhist practitioner, this was simply not right.

So what to do? I know my garden will inevitably and naturally have beneficial insects in it, so I play mantras and display holy images so that they – and other predators which may wander into my garden – may be triggered to take a higher rebirth.

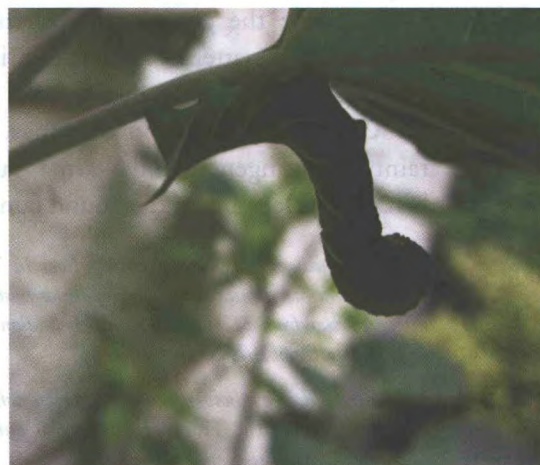
Of course, I also discontinued use of all insecticides and chose native plant species that would attract a myriad of native creatures. The result: I have a garden teeming with wildlife.

I became particularly interested in how to create a habitat for animals displaced by the rapid rates of urban sprawl. Sara Stein, in her book *Noah's Garden*, discusses how to become an “un-gardener”. Tolerance for wildlife in all its forms is necessary for this to work. It is not about tidy or formal gardens. It's about creating natural habitat.

We used native plants more and more, designing a garden with irregular shaped beds and paths, just as nature does. The outcome is amazing! Creatures are naturally attracted. It took a few growing seasons, but one night there she was, a mother sentient being: a fox and her two pups! She was living under our shed in her den.

Later, corn and rat snakes, skinks, anoles, fence lizards, an armadillo, opossums, a cuckoo bird, woodpeckers, toads, frogs, and a large array of insects began to make the garden their home. Sadly, though, most of these creatures eat other creatures. Some might say, “That's great! The snakes eat the rats; the fox eat the snakes; the lizards eat the toads,” but this is nothing to rejoice about.

Fortunate are the animals that wind up in the garden of a Buddhist practitioner. Ours is decorated with holy images, prayer flags, and tsa tsas, which I make and place up in trees and on the fence, and I play the sound of our holy guru Lama Zopa Rinpoche reciting





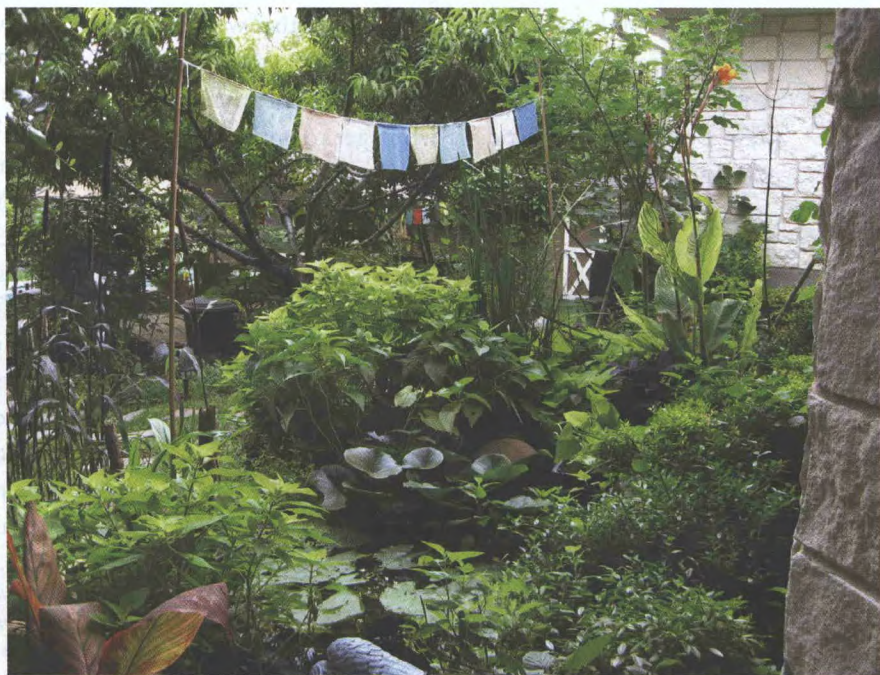
the Sanghata Sutra outside. When I am weeding, I say mantras out loud for all the creatures to hear. I delight to know there is a possibility of a virtuous imprint so animals may find a good human rebirth.

It generally takes three years of patience for a garden to phase into its own rhythms as the wise gardener keeps the yard weeded by hand, fertilizes the soil using certified organic fertilizers, and makes use of native plants suitable for your region. Eventually, native plants take on a beautiful habit, and if we let nature do its job everything will strike a balance.

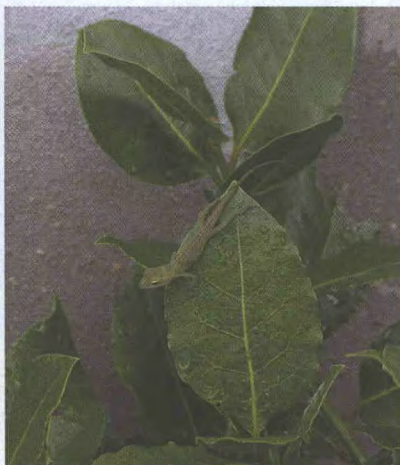
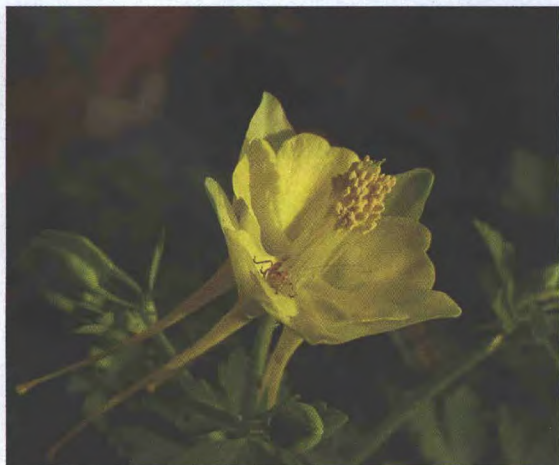
Making sure the soil is teeming with organisms is vital to a healthy garden. Worms, the work horses in a natural garden, turn organic matter into elements that roots can easily use. The most important part of a healthy non-killing garden is to nourish the soil. Learn what type soil you have by calling your local council. I highly recommend the book *Secrets to Great Soil* by Elizabeth P. Stell.

Compost is black gold and an important tool in cutting down on the amount of garbage filling the landfills, which are rapidly reaching their peak in America. On our half-acre we assemble our brush in a pile instead of sending it to the landfill, and many animals take shelter there. Our resident opossum died last year. He lived with us for five years (normal lifespan is about two years), and although he never came up to the house, when he was ready to die he did so near our back door. Maybe he wanted to tell us "good-bye and thanks", who knows. Now we have a raccoon living there.

Unhealthy plants attract insect pests and succumb, while healthy plants have the stamina to thrive, despite a temporary infestation of insects. Good garden hygiene plays



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an important role in having a healthy garden. Let's face it – the teachings tell us there isn't an atom of space without a sentient being. We are all killing constantly, without intention. Being mindful that I am doing this all the time is helpful to my practice. It brings me to the realization that we are all part of the big picture: each of us is important to the existence of every other sentient being. I tread lightly. All sentient beings have Buddha nature, and we won't get to enlightenment by killing in order to have perfect gardens.

### Tolerance required

The records say I own my land: I say it's only on loan to me. I am a steward, not the owner. A squirrel who lives out back comes to the peach tree daily and takes one bite out of ten or more peaches! I've talked to her, letting her know she is welcome to eat the peaches, but to finish one and *then* take another. It never works, so tolerance is necessary.

Mockingbirds love tomatoes. They stick their beaks into a tomato, piercing the skin. I cut this part off and eat the tomato. Insect pests get a hankering for one of my ornamental plants and destroy its aesthetic, but I've learned to tolerate this. It helps on two levels; I don't get angry at the insects (how silly anyway!) and I am not attached to the plant. I know people who cleave

to their gardens as if they are more important than any life form, and douse chemicals everywhere.

Gardening naturally adds joy to our lives. Giving an animal trapped in the lower realms the opportunity to create positive imprints is vital for the sake of all beings. Learning how to be tolerant of animals has been a rewarding lesson. I can look at rats now and appreciate their beauty and their intense suffering; being hated and murdered every second of every day. These too are all mother sentient beings in a lower realm and I vow to take part, however small, in protecting them so they may take a good rebirth, and during this life keeping their suffering to a minimum.

Our garden is a National Wildlife Federation Backyard Habitat and Texas Parks and Wildlife Certified Backyard Habitat. But no matter how small your property, you can provide habitat. The most important thing we must remember about having this precious human body is simply, don't kill. When you rescue an ant from drowning in the pool, the life you are saving is your own. ☸

*Victoria Rainone is a master gardener who is also a volunteer with the Liberation Prison Project. She is happy to answer questions about humane gardening. Her email is [thubten@austin.rr.com](mailto:thubten@austin.rr.com). See also these websites: [www.nwf.org/backyard/](http://www.nwf.org/backyard/), [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/wildscapes/](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/wildscapes/) and [www.urbanforest.on.net/backyard-q09.htm](http://www.urbanforest.on.net/backyard-q09.htm)*

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The look of the design should be eye-catching and simple and work in two colors.

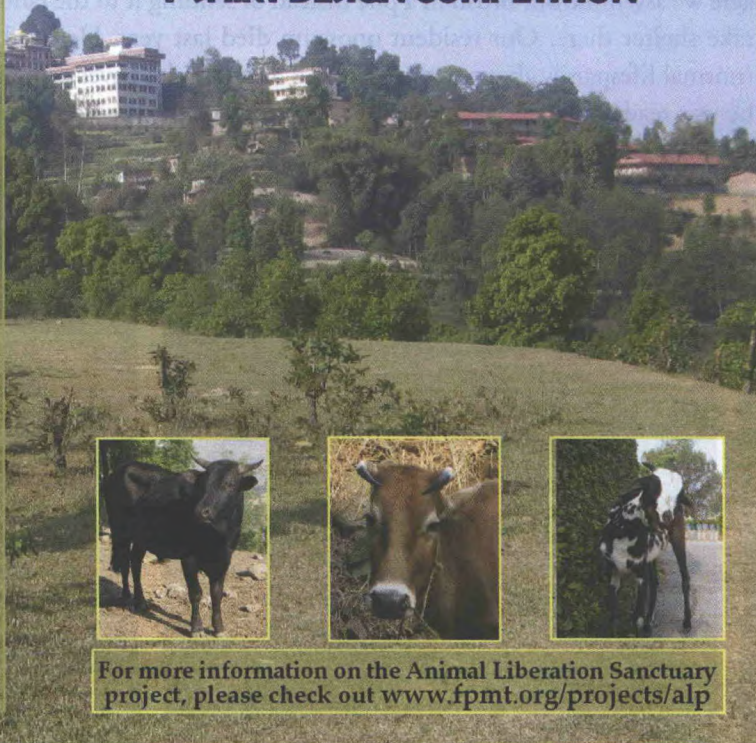
For competition conditions and submission form, email the Sanctuary Co-ordinators

**Tania Duratovic & Phil Hunt**

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