

Short Attention Span Theater of the Absurd

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Saturday

Garden Snapshot

It's Independence Day, although our neighbors have been setting off fireworks for weeks so it seems anti-climactic. We're not going to a fireworks display. It's hot and dry, and was hot and dry yesterday. I've been going out to work in the garden only briefly each day, before the heat gets too intense, and at dusk.

Yesterday Joshua came outside while I was watering and said he was disappointed that there weren't tomatoes yet. I took him around to show him that several of the tomato plants did in fact have small green tomatoes on them. He was pleasantly shocked. I told him that he was looking without seeing. I was watering the cucumber plants, which have climbed like mad up their supports. I pulled back some leaves and showed him the 20-inch emojis dangling proudly underneath. We have already harvested some enormous cucumbers and eaten them raw moments after bringing them inside.

What is best in life? Crushing your enemies, seeing them driven before you, and hearing the lamentations of their women — that's all very nice, but have you bitten into a deep-green, almost black cucumber, still warm from the sun, that you cut from the vine mere seconds ago? That's got to be right up there. And the tomato plants are busy inflating their fruits as I write.

Three of the four types of pepper plants are doing great. The paprika pepper plants have hoisted dozens of huge pale yellow-green fruits straight into the air, which was a surprise because I had no idea from the picture of the peppers on the little plastic plant tag what the growing peppers would actually look like. We're going to have a lot of paprika peppers. What does one do with them? I'll have to do some reading.

The sweet red cherry peppers are there in great numbers but they are all still dark green. I am really looking forward to tasting those. I don't know what they will taste like, but I expect them to be bite-sized and sweet, and I want to put them in my mouth whole and have them burst in my mouth like Freshen-up gum. There are some cayenne peppers that have turned red, and I think that

means I can harvest them. They can sit on the windowsill and dry for a while and then they are terrific to add a little heat to bean dishes. They last a long time. The only pepper plants that aren't doing anything worth speaking of yet are the Scotch Bonnet plants. They haven't grown very much and they haven't produced any flowers at all. Maybe they flower late in the season? Maybe they don't like growing in the same bed next to the other pepper plants, who all seem to get along fine with each other? I have no idea. I'm by no means a master gardener and am the first to admit I don't know much about how to cultivate all these plants aside from what I have read on the little plastic tags. If three varieties of pepper do great, and one doesn't, I think that'll still be a pretty good haul of peppers, and next year maybe we'll skip the Scotch Bonnet peppers, and try a different hot variety.

Sunday update: the scotch bonnet plants seem to have read what I wrote and are rapidly getting their act together, suddenly growing with shocking speed and beginning to flower. Maybe they were just waiting for the some real heat, and levels of ultraviolet light that will redden my skin in only five minutes, to produce some really hot peppers? Are pepper plants actually heat pumps? How does that work, exactly?

The corn is shoulder-high, although we have only a few corn plants this year — we put them in more as an experiment than a practical source of corn. If things go well we might get enough ears for one good meal. We will then consider whether we want to try to grow corn next year. The four dill plants, which I've been hacking back every few days, are shoulder-high as well. We need to move at least three of them elsewhere, and although I love dill, especially on potatoes with a little sour cream, we can only eat it so fast!

The basil plants are the herbs that are going bonkers in the kitchen garden bed right now. We have a lot of basil varieties and all of them have done very well. They love the hot days. There is plain old Genovese basil, lemon basil, lime basil, Thai basil, cinammon basil, licorice basil, spicy globe basil, lettuce leaf basil, and purple basil. I wanted to try them all. The profusion of flavors is actually a bit confusing though. I'm not sure we want to make a big batch of pesto that mixes different flavors together, although some would fit well together, like the lemon and lime. My favorite this year is the lettuce leaf basil. We only put one lettuce leaf basil plant in the bed, but it grows huge leaves with incredible speed, and has a fairly mild flavor. We can just tear it up and toss it in a salad like a lettuce. You might want to use it in combination with milder-tasting leaves, but I am perfectly happy eating a salad where all the leaves are very flavorful and together create a riot of flavors — sorrel, arugula, nasturtium, anise hyssop, and this basil. Our salads have been wonderful. Grace made a salad covered with nasturtium flowers, borage flowers, and pansy flowers. It was a work of art. That didn't keep me from gobbling it up. Our Italian oregano is producing a huge profusion of small flowers, and I've been sprinkling those over our salads like one might sprinkle capers. Not having a good idea yet what to do with the cinammon and licorice basil, I've been throwing the flowers on top of the salads

to accentuate the other flavors.

I think next year I want to grow a half-dozen lettuce leaf basil plants and a half-dozen Genovese basil plants. We can still grow some of the more exotic varieties, but these can go in the concrete block border and we'll use them to accent the usual basil flavors. We probably don't *really* want or need a half-dozen lemon basil plants and half-dozen lime basil plants that we've got now. Meanwhile, I need to search for recipes.

I think we're going to have a lot of potatoes, too, although I don't want to jinx it.

We have walking onions that we've been cutting down as needed and unkempt pony-tail bunches of chives that we can harvest as needed. The leeks are coming along nicely — they are about the size of scallions now, but I am hoping they will get a lot larger. We could actually wind up with a ridiculous number of baseball-bat sized leeks, and if so we'll have to give some away. The green bunching onions are unfortunately still incredibly tiny. Our garlic came out very strangely — it appeared to be ready to harvest, but the plants looked more like hard green onions, with no real bulb shapes to speak of, although when sliced up they did taste like garlic. We're not quite sure what happened, but we still count it a partial success whenever we get something that we can eat, even if it wasn't quite what we expected.

We planted three kinds of tarragon this year: French, Russian, and Mexican. I had planted six French plants, two Mexican plants, and only one Russian plant, but the Russian variety had expansionist aims and has been attempting to annex France and Mexico. In fact it spread and grew so much that it was choking out the other varieties. So I hacked it back unmercifully, yesterday (Friday). We did a taste test. The French tarragon is mild with an anise flavor. The Russian variety does not taste very good. The leaves have a pasty texture and there is a lingering bitterness. The Mexican variety tastes much different — it has a pungent anise flavor, but also a spicy-hot aftertaste. So, I like both the French and Mexican varieties, but they are quite different. As an experiment, we have bottled up three separate containers of white pickling vinegar, each stuffed with one of the three varieties, so that we can compare the results. Joy had some tarragon vinegar made with white wine vinegar, put up in 2016, and it was delicious. So we're curious to see how this project comes out.

I did a little reading about tarragon. It turns out that while the French and Russian tarragon plants are in the daisy family, the Mexican variety is actually a kind of marigold. The more I learn about herbs and how they are named and classified, the more I understand that plants are the ultimate, original anarchists. Lemon bee balm (*Monarda Citriodora*, a member of the extremely large and varied *Lamiaceae* or mint family) is in our garden twice, because I planted some of it, sold as "lemon mint" (labeled as a *menthus* although *Monarda Citriodora* is not really of the tribe *Menthaea* or the genus *Mentha*) in the mint bed, and some of it, sold as lemon bee balm, in the border of the kitchen bed and next to

the bee barns. And it is not to be confused with lemon balm, which is also in the *Lamiaceae* family, but of genus *Melissa*, but actually looks much more like peppermint (genus *Mentha*). Anyway, the anarchist plants are flowering now, and the bees love them. *Monarda Citriodora* doesn't taste much like a mint, but we will find a use for it — maybe to make an iced tea?

Speaking of tea, right after the solstice, the chocolate mint (family *Lamiaceae*, genus *Mentha*, species *mentha x piperita* 'chocolate mint'), a slower-growing, creeping variety, stopped growing sideways, sending out creepers, and started growing up, as if the change from the days getting longer to the days getting shorter had flipped a switch, turning off one set of genes and turning on another. I'm guessing that is actually what happened. But the result is that we are now getting enough chocolate mint to harvest. So, here is how I make my favorite mint tea:

- Put two or three black tea bags in a pot.
- Cut down a generous handful of two- or three-inch chocolate mint sprigs, using scissors, right above the points where the leaves branch off, to avoid leaving ugly dessicated stems sticking up.
- Strip the leaves from the stems.
- Throw the stems in the pot with the tea bags.
- Roll the leaves firmly into a ball between your hands a few times, mashing them up until they feel wet.
- Put the leaves into a tea filter and put that in the pot, too.
- Fill the pot to the top with boiling water and allow it to steep for much longer than you would normally brew black tea — ten or fifteen minutes.
- Serve with a little honey.
- You can re-fill the pot with boiling water and let it steep at least once more, and possibly twice.

I am hoping that next year there will be so much chocolate mint growing in the mint bed and elsewhere that we will be able to go grab enough mint leaves to make a pot whenever we want one.

I have been writing primarily about the kitchen garden and the beds in the front of the house, because I've primarily been working on these beds. The culinary herbs and peppers, especially, have been my particular interest, while Grace has put more effort into the vegetables. But Joy has been growing red oak lettuce and butter lettuce and a number of other greens including pak choy and kale and kohlrabi, and a whole lot of other types of plants going in shady and sunny spots around the house. She's put in many, many plants, including horseradish, groundcherries, comfrey, Sweet Annie, and alyssum. Some of these she brought with her from Grand Rapids last fall, and they over-wintered successfully. Some she's acquired since moving in with us. She's also growing more varieties of vegetable plants, including more types of tomato, peas, radishes, scarlet runner beans — really, a dizzying number of different kinds of plants.

Joy has also been waging a long war against several species we don't love to

have on our property, including buckthorn and poison ivy, painstakingly digging out stumps, and opening up spaces for more wanted plants, both in beds and naturalized. This has been a bad year for poison ivy, or I guess a good year if you are poison ivy. On the local Nextoor online group, one of the posts is entitled, in all capital letters, “POISON IVY CONTROL.” The comments there are mostly about spraying toxic chemicals all over the place. We are not interested in that, although speaking for myself at least, I think a flamethrower is not entirely out of the question.

My personal approach to gardening emerged from an early interest in growing houseplants. I like my plants to be exotic-looking, tidy, and manicured, on neatly mulched beds. I especially like variegated varieties and small, picture-perfect plants, and I especially love the way plants smell, and the textures and colors of their leaves, which is why I am so fascinated with the fragrant thymes, basil, oregano, sages, and mints. I’m the type of gardener who would like to take my exotic varieties of herb and flower plants to compete in a garden show — in fact, if you take me to a state fair, expect me to get lost in the plant competitions, rather than the animal competitions. I also love it when I can contribute to a larger-scale project, like building a bed, but when it comes to gardening, I don’t yet *think* in terms of visualizing and planning these larger-scale projects.

Grace subscribes more to a more anarchic, garden bed style, drawing diagrams of garden beds in advance, mixing carefully chosen plants together, but with the purpose of producing food in quantity, using permaculture principles.

It seems to me that Joy takes a longer view of what can be done with this property, thinking both in terms of what plants we can grow this season, and also what plants can be naturalized, and how the landscape itself can be sculpted over a process of years to create whole gardens that will not only grow useful and wanted plants, but also exist as pleasant spaces to enjoy. In the cleared-out spaces where she is beating back the buckthorn and poison ivy, she is establishing little microclimates for human use, with tables and chairs and little surprises to discover, such as a giant clock face with no hands to help you forget what time it is, and a tiny folding chair to help any visiting fairies to cool off in the shade.

Joy also likes to make as much use of possible of the resources she finds right here in the yard, including plants that are actually growing natively here already but which can be relocated into places where they will grow better and be more useful, and things like sticks that can serve as stakes, and vines which can be cut into flexible pieces to make hoops that can then be covered with fabric to make crop covers. She’s found discarded piles of bricks and concrete blocks in the easement, and has rescued those, and so some of our garden bed borders are now made of this “trash” which is very useful (and free!) She’s also found a lot of strange piles of actual trash, including, oddly, motorcycle parts, and then, even more oddly, a tiny vintage toy motorcycle, about the right size for a green plastic toy soldier to ride. And Joy has also been amazing at finding many things around town that other people are getting rid of, such as the canoe that now forms the children’s garden.

One way to think about us, and our different approaches to gardening: Grace likes to draw diagrams of garden beds on graph paper, thinking in advance about what to plant where, although this battle plan doesn't always survive contact with the enemy unscathed, and so we are now relocating plants and revising plans for next year. I just bought one of everything to experiment with, and planted them around the kitchen bed, mostly in the concrete blocks, and then quickly assembled the mint beds when I found the huge number of mint varieties available; as the spring went on, I added a few more of my favorite plants elsewhere. I made the detailed diagrams and pictorial tours of the garden beds and Twitter threads after planting them. Joy dives in to the woods to beat back the invasives, makes lists, and imagines what the property could look like by the end of the spring, the end of the summer, next spring, and years from now.

I'm probably mis-characterizing both Grace and Joy's approaches to gardening, and I don't mean to suggest that they don't also think at the micro level, or that I never think at the macro level, either in space or in time, but that these seem to be our respective tendencies, as I've observed them. I'm sure Grace and Joy will both likely have things to say about this characterization. But to my way of thinking, this difference in the way the three of us think about gardening, while it might tend to produce some small-scale conflict, ought to help us to build shared gardens that none of us by ourselves would have thought up or built. So I'm very excited about our collaboration... an anarchic "cross-pollination," if you will.

Sunday

Visits and Errands

Last night Grace and I went out to pick up some car seats that my friends were getting rid of — so that Elanor and Malachi and Benjamin will all three have car seats ready for them when they all three need to move up a size. Although, for the time being, we haven't been taking them out much.

We stood on our friends' yard with our masks on, physically distanced, and took a few minutes to catch up. I haven't seen them in a long time and it was great to talk to them. They, like us, are following the COVID-19 numbers with great concern, and are not happy with the casual re-opening and un-masking that they are observing while the number of infections and deaths over time continues to bend the curve upwards.

After visiting with my friends, we went to Plum Market, out near my office. Plum Market is sanitizing carts, counting shoppers, handing out gloves, enforcing physical distancing, and everyone was carefully masked. We bought a blueberry pie, and tortillas, and some date and nut rolls, half a hot roast chicken to snack on, and some cold drinks. Oh, and some bourbon. Plum Market is a Whole Foods clone, but a small local chain. Their prices are even higher than Whole

Foods. We knew this, and checked tags — I wanted to get a snack of egg salad, but wasn't going to pay eight dollars for three ounces of egg salad and a few crackers in a plastic package — but we were still horrified in the checkout line. They are deliberately obscuring prices on packaged foods — the date and nut rolls, in the produce section, had the prices on stickers on the underside of the packages. Most items have prices marked on the shelves, but some don't. They know that shoppers are trying not to handle packages excessively, because they don't want to touch things and then put them back. So I just picked up two small plastic packages of date and nut rolls and put them into the cart without turning them upside-down and looking at the prices. I expected them to cost six or eight dollars each. They actually cost eighteen dollars each.

We have been carefully considering what stores we want to put in our regular rotation, in addition to Costco, which is enforcing mask rules and has seemed quite safe during the pandemic, because we can't get everything we want from Costco. We aren't going into Meijer, because it is always crowded and we have faced situations with aggressive anti-maskers. We are nervous about returning to Target, because they don't actually enforce mask-wearing and we've been crowded by boisterous, unmasked shoppers. We will continue to support Vestergaard Farms because they have been great about safety. We were considering adding Plum Market to the rotation, possibly replacing Target, and despite their generally very high prices. But thirteen dollars a pound for dates? And refusing to mark items so that the prices are clearly readable without handling the items? I consider this to be very nearly profiteering behavior, taking advantage of the awkward pandemic shopping situation, and I won't support them.

Independence Day Dinner

For our Independence Day dinner, Grace made some small sliders of ground bison topped with pieces of bacon, along with some roasted bratwurst. None of us felt like standing outside and lighting up a grill — it was simply too hot for that. We steamed some corn (from Plum Market, not from our garden) but it was taking so long to cook that we didn't eat it last night, but instead ate it for breakfast this morning.

With the bourbon, I made mint juleps. I've never made them before, and I think I've only had them once before, decades ago. I had purchased two kinds of bourbon, one a bottle of Grass Widow, a very fine bourbon, and a smaller bottle of Bulleit, a perfectly decent bourbon but not quite in the same league as Grass Widow. I was more than willing to use something like Jim Beam Black for the juleps, but that's apparently too pedestrian a brand for Plum Market. I was thinking that I would save the Grass Widow for sipping and make the juleps with the Bulleit. But at the last minute I used the Grass Widow for the drinks.

We had picked up a bag of ice at the gas station. We don't usually have enough room in our freezer for ice trays, and we generally don't use it, so we did not

have any ice on hand. I harvested a heap of sprigs from the “Kentucky Colonel” spearmint that I planted specifically to make mint juleps. The recipes I looked up online called for a simple syrup and a few muddled mint leaves, but I said to hell with that and just boiled the mint leaves with the sugar to make a very flavorful mint syrup. Mint juleps are meant to be made with crushed ice, like high-octane snow cones, but I could not get our blender to crush ice successfully — it would just liquefy the ice at the bottom of the container, leaving the rest intact, no matter how much I tried to shake or stir the blender container. So I gave up and we just had the syrup over chunks of ice with bourbon and a few drops of bitters, garnished with mint sprigs. The kids got a version without the bourbon or the bitters.

Both versions were delicious. I want to try this again sometime — maybe I will see if I can find a bar blender, designed to crush ice properly. There is half a bag of ice left in the freezer, so I think today I will try making a syrup with the lemon mint (or lemon bee balm, if you prefer) and try serving that over ice, without the bourbon.

We recently learned, to our annoyance, that Elanor has low iron. Her doctors apparently didn’t tell us because while it was quite low, it was not quite low enough to reach the cutoff point where she would be considered anemic and receive a prescription. But we are annoyed because it is low enough to result in restless leg syndrome, which would explain some of her wild behavior at bedtime — and even the odd way she would kick, back in the womb. So we have started giving her an herbal iron supplement, and we’ll see if that helps her. It would have been great to know about this years ago.

Malachi has a follow-up appointment to be re-tested for his egg allergy. So we may be getting closer to the day when we can freely cook and eat eggs in our home again. That would be so great!

Short Attention Span Theater

I have a huge backlog of notes in my phone — things I’ve been intending to write about in the newsletter for weeks or months, but have not gotten around to. I want to finish up the newsletter and get it sent out, so I’m going to just quickly mention a number of items that have been on my mind:

Have I Got the ’Rona?

I keep thinking I might have the ’rona. Every once in a while, I start finding my chest aching a bit. But then I realize that this is happening because it is actually an “ozone action day” or there is some other kind of active air quality alert. It’s good to know that there is an explanation. It’s not cool that our air sometimes hurts the lungs.

Show 'em One Green Day Song and Look What Happens

A month or two back I played a Green Day song for one of the kids on YouTube. I was getting sick of hearing Veronica's favorite band, My Chemical Romance, over and over again. Now they have the Green Day version of Rock Band for the Playstation 3 and they are taking turns singing dozens of Green Day songs with the band. Veronica can ace the game with the difficulty rating set on "expert." She can sing the parts better than I can.

Weighty Matters

I mentioned in a previous newsletter that I had become concerned that the pickier eater kids had lost some weight. We made a conscious decision to keep a lot more carbs on hand, including cereal, ramen noodles, pasta, and tortillas. We've also been making bean dishes more regularly. The kids that tend to starve themselves, holding out for bread or other carbohydrates to the exclusion of the other foods in the pantry and refrigerator, have reversed their weight loss. So this is a bit frustrating, because we want them to eat a fully balanced diet that is not centered around starches, but at least we have a solution.

Epazote

Speaking of beans, we've started adding sprigs of epazote to pots of beans. We had read that it helps cut down on the gas from bean dishes, but we were startled by just how well it actually works. It works shockingly well. Eating a big pot of black-eyed peas with a ham hock and some collards over rice, not one of us produced a single toot. It's uncanny.

Plastic People

I keep finding more plastic in our topsoil. It's frustrating. Joy searched to find the best sources available, and we've had two deliveries. Both loads of soil have been riddled with small fragments of plastic. There are also bits of glass and other debris. We had the same problem in Saginaw and the source is most likely municipal compost systems. But it is impossible to pick out, and deteriorates over time into micro-plastic particles. This material is not chemically inert in the human body, and winds up in water and inside plant cells, and so inside human cells.

Despite our best efforts here we're running an uncontrolled experiment on our, and our children's, endocrine systems.

The Devil's Caterpillar

A few weeks ago we found a fat green caterpillar on one of our fennel plants. I watched him for many minutes as he methodically ate the fennel plant, one tiny leaf at a time, immediately moving on to the next leaf. It was so entertaining to watch I couldn't even stay mad. I didn't want to disturb it because Veronica

thought that it might be a monarch caterpillar. But I didn't want him to eat the entire fennel plant, so we decided to relocate it.

Veronica brought out a cup and I brought out the kitchen shears and we decided to snip off the fennel sprig he was tightly gripping, and put it in the cup to carry it off elsewhere. But as soon as we touched the sprig, he glared at us and two shocking orange devil horns popped out of his head. I think we may have both screamed.

It turns out that the caterpillar was not a monarch caterpillar, although it looks somewhat similar, but an anise swallowtail caterpillar. Wikipedia says:

...its major food plants are members of the carrot family, *Apiaceae*, (including fennel), and also some members of the citrus family, *Rutaceae*. Like all swallowtail caterpillars, if disturbed, it will suddenly evert bright orange osmeteria (or "stinkhorns") from just behind its head, glandular structures which give off a foul odor.

That's what Wikipedia says. But I wasn't born yesterday. This was a tiny minion of Satan, a little heavy metal fan holding up a lighter and waving his devil horns in time to grinding down-tuned guitar chords and pounding drums that only he could hear. So he took a little ride into the woods. *Bon chance*, fat little demon spawn!

Can We Shoot the Rabbits?

Our garden beds have been raided regularly by rabbits. They are apparently deterred by some of the aromatic herbs, but there are places around the concrete-block border of the kitchen garden bed where some of the blocks contain pansies or other non-stinky plants. The rabbits will frequently eat all the flowers right off the pansies, leaving a dozen little stems sticking up. They also have eaten a number of plants in the kids' garden, and some plants from the greens beds. Recently one apparently climbed all the way into the kitchen bed and ate everything it could reach from a kale plant.

I've been giving some thought to purchasing an air-powered pellet rifle with a scope and a tripod. We could keep it locked up in the basement, and at dawn and dusk I could take it outside and hunker down in the grass, unmoving, waiting to blow the brains out of our small garden raiders. Grace knows how to dress and cook rabbits.

Would that be so wrong?

But decent air rifles — models that can be aimed very well — are unfortunately at least as expensive as similar conventional firearms. And we don't really want firearms in the house, even the air-powered variety. So this will remain a vengeful fantasy, at least for the time being.

We've also got wild turkeys roaming our woods, and although they are no doubt tough and stringy, I think they would make great broth!

Winding Up

I've migrated the writing and production of the newsletter from my ThinkPad laptop, running Windows, to one of the new HP laptops, running Linux. I'm wrestling with gratuitous changes. The keyboard of this laptop reverses the position of the control key and function key on the bottom left corner of the keyboard. That's surprisingly annoying and if I had noticed it before buying them, I might have chosen a different laptop brand. Ubuntu MATE's file manager doesn't allow me to click on a file name to edit the file name. That's strange and gratuitously different from both Windows and MacOS.

I have to reverse the direction of all the slashes in the commands that I usually paste into Windows Powershell, or the Linux shell does not parse them correctly.

I'm not able to use my preferred editors, Notepad++ on Windows or BBEdit on Mac. I was not able to find an alternative to Notepad++ that I was really content with. So I'm using the editor that came with Ubuntu, called "Pluma." It's OK. I could always drop back to **vi**, but I've become accustomed to Notepad++. But it's got a command line, so I can use **pandoc**, and that's what I need to go from Markdown to an HTML fragment that I can paste into Tinyletter's editor. I'll see how it goes.

Have a great week!

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