

A Delightful Dilemma

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

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I tend to be an accidental gardener. If anything grows in my yard, it's by pure serendipity. Somebody planted azaleas and camellias decades ago . . . Wisteria appears magically every year . . . A jack-o-lantern carved out back one fall becomes a small pumpkin patch the next summer . . . That sort of thing.

For the serious gardener, springtime in the Lowcountry is a glorious demonstration of karma – of reaping what you sow. For those of us with less energy and acumen – us accidental gardeners – it's the very definition of grace. An unearned gift, happily received. One need not lift a finger to enjoy the bounty, and I generally don't.

With one exception: When we bought our house 15 years ago, there were two wooden window boxes out front, each overflowing with blooming impatiens. I fell in love. For years, I would faithfully plant impatiens in those boxes every spring, then watch them flourish all summer, become leggy in the fall, and finally peter out sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Oh, I sometimes tried to prolong their tenure, covering them with flannel sheets when a freeze came along. But inevitably, the sheets would blow off, or crush the flowers, and eventually, the poor impatiens gave up the ghost. It was always dispiriting, but as an accidental gardener – and a basically lazy human being – I figured I was lucky to have them as long as I did.

Last spring, I decided to try something new. An experiment. The smaller of those two window boxes was now gone – a casualty of Hurricane Matthew that we decided not to replace – and the larger one, though also Matthew-ravaged, had been rebuilt by my husband, the man of many skills. When it was time to replant my impatiens, instead of planting them directly into that new window box, I planted them in two long, rectangular containers from Lowe's that fit perfectly into the box.

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And all through the fall and winter – if you can call this thing we’ve had “winter” – I’ve nurtured those impatiens like a mother doting on a newborn baby. Every time the temperature hovered anywhere near freezing – it did several times in early winter, and even snowed, remember? – I diligently hauled the containers inside. (It was a pain, too, because they’re heavy and unwieldy and hard to remove from the window box.) Also, I’ve been periodically pinching them back, keeping them from becoming too stringy and stalky.

I wasn’t at all sure I could keep these impatiens alive – me with my black thumb and my “accidental” ways. The label on that little stick thingy called them “annuals.” According to the experts, “annuals” are the plants that bloom for part of the year, then die. No resurrection. No second coming. Nada.

Well, I’m still not quite sure what’s going on here – or how long they’ll last – but as of now, these “annuals” look very much as they did when I planted them almost a year ago. Full and lovely and coral of hue, preening beautifully in their white window box, against my charcoal gray house with its peach-painted door.

Only now, I’ve got a dilemma on my hands. A wrens’ nest has appeared in this selfsame window box, amidst these selfsame impatiens.

Why a dilemma, you ask? Years ago, a family of wrens made a nest in my smaller window box – the one that’s no longer with us – and as it turned out, the box was not big enough for the both of ‘em . . . not box enough for wrens and impatiens alike. Every time I went to water the flowers – because you *have* to do that – the wrens seemed traumatized and fluttered off in a panic. So I stopped watering around the nest, which meant the plants weren’t getting as much moisture as they needed.

But worse still, the wrens’ nest took up space where the flowers should have been spreading, creating a large gap in my window box – a visual hole in my floral tableau – and it really irked my sense of symmetry. I might be an accidental gardener, but I’m a stickler for symmetry.

Still, I loved my wrens. The way they hopped and flapped and busied themselves with wren-ish

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activity. After a while, there were tiny white eggs in the nest, and eventually, a brood of baby birds. I carefully documented all these developments on my iPhone camera, and my joy knew no bounds. I still have pictures of the babies with their beaks wide open, their little necks upstretched to the sky . . . pics of Mom and Dad perched on the window box, ready to stuff those little beaks. It was bliss.

Then one day, I went to check on my babies and they were gone. Just gone. I was bereft. I had no idea what had happened. Had they flown away – they seemed too small and frail – or been snatched by a predator? Apparently, blue jays are a common culprit, and Lord knows I've got plenty of those flashy, dive-bombing rogues on my property. I'm very fond of them, but still . . .

When all was said and done, I was left with a big hole in my heart – and a giant hole in my impatiens, which looked dreadful from the street. Because this all happened one summer, I just sucked it up and carried on, knowing the plants would die in late fall anyway, and that I'd replant the following spring.

But that was years ago, and now it's barely March, and I have this phenomenon on my hands – these “annuals” that should be dead by now, and *would* be dead, if not for sheer force of will. *My* will. For all I know, these impatiens could live forever! Or at least through the summer. I am proud of my miracle flowers and I want to keep them alive, looking good – and symmetrical – and see how far I can take this experiment.

But I want my wrens, too.

See, over the past year, not only have I become less “accidental” – more intentional – about my plants, but I've also become more intentional about my birds. No longer content to just sit back and watch them frolic in the trees, I've added feeder after feeder to our yard, experimenting with all manner of birdseed and squirrel deterrents (safflower seed really repels those little bandits, y'all!) and my efforts have paid off. They say if you build it, they will come . . . and I've built a pretty decent bird hang-out here on our humble estate.

And the only thing that makes me happier than flowers in springtime . . . is birds.

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So I will not touch this wrens' nest. It is safe in my window box come hell, high water, or even a big, unsightly hole in my floral tableau. Whatever havoc these wee birds might wreak on my miracle flowers, and my precious sense of symmetry, I will welcome them, watch over them, and hang on their every adorable move.

I cannot, however, protect them from those damn blue jays. It's every bird for himself around here.

Margaret Evans is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. (Read more of her [Rants & Raves](#) or visit her blog at

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