

The Burdens of Job on the Gardener

Written by By Will Balk, Jr.

Tuesday, 13 November 2018 13:41 - Last Updated Wednesday, 14 November 2018 07:24



In the windbreak of pine trees planted 30 years ago to slow winter's westerly winds upon the camellia garden and that side of the house, one of the trees, now some 60 feet high, had succumbed to age or disease.

The snag—bare of bark from the voracious work of resident pileated woodpeckers, flickers, and red-cockaded woodpeckers, porous with holes for nests of birds and mammals—the snag had fallen silently in the night and lay segmented, stretched across a swathe of lawn and up a low rise marking the camellia garden's edge.

The topmost ten feet, still some eight inches thick, had fallen squarely across one of my father's unnamed seedling camellias, a "rescue" from one of the old family cemeteries which dot every farmstead in this area of South Carolina. Unlike most such foundlings, this plant had exquisite form, growing quite low and wide, beautifully rounded. Its bloom, instead of the usual single row of petals, was richly double and in a fine, pleasing rose color.

It now stood shorn of its lovely symmetry, smashed to a jumble of broken branches beneath the fallen pine log. I was crestfallen.

Shortly before that, winter had finally relented, it seemed, and the pear trees were starting their bloom, many bulbs were emerging, and the tender plants that I keep under cover for the winter

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had been put out to soak up warm air and sunshine. I returned from an overnight stay away for a garden conference to find a rogue cold snap had inflicted substantial damage to almost anything with new growth, and particularly to the tender plants just now exposed. Most would recover, but one beloved plant—a large and handsome Nun's Orchid, *Phaius tankervilleae*—was completely blackened to the crown.

This orchid had already, a year before, been killed to the ground by a freeze. I considered it a miracle that some new shoots had emerged last summer from the roots to grow into a substantial, if vulnerable, plant. It had special meaning, since it had been an extravagant gift from my dear friend Anne. Now it was gone. There's only so much an orchid can take. Me, too.

Having recognized ages ago the limitations even our expansive enclosed porches can provide for winter plant protection (some people collect LP record albums; I seem to accumulate plants too delicate for exposure to the real world), I had designed and constructed from many different materials a quite large (to me) greenhouse.

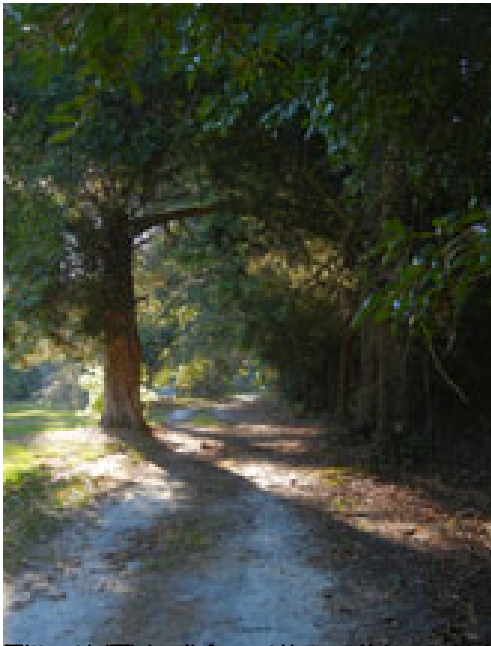
I was pleased with its somewhat reasonable cost, its location next to my 14 X 30 potting shed, and its utility. It was sited so that the deciduous trees nearby would allow glorious sunlight all winter, but the summer's leafy shade would protect many plants from overheating and sunburn. Perfect.

We had weeks of incessant early spring rains this year. In one of those weeks of rain, one of the protecting deciduous trees, an old wild cherry, a species notorious for rotting from within, fell atop the greenhouse, collapsing the entire structure. In this case, no plants suffered damage, but the greenhouse now is a twisted shambles. Coming upon the sight the next morning, I was heartsick.

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