



I can't count the times I have looked at a plant and said "Oh, I used to have one of those."

When I go to that Great Nursery in the Sky, will I be called to account for all the pots I forgot to water, the torture of perennials that had been beaten into submission by weeds, or the failure to put the needs of the plant over my own desires about placement and zone appropriateness? The neglected plants that starved? The forgotten pots that I brought home and never got planted?

Mea culpa, mea culpa. My sins are many.

However, whatever perdition I am relegated to, I won't be alone.

Remember when your mother used to scold you when you took too big a helping and told you that your eyes were bigger than your stomach? A similar affliction is shared by almost all

gardeners. It's their third chromosome. As nature abhors a vacuum, so gardeners abhor an empty space. So we buy plants. And we buy plants.

A garden designer friend calls gardeners like me 'plunkers.' It's not quite pejorative, but it's not a compliment, either.

At a garden seminar a few years ago, the speaker asked for a show of hands from

everyone who had an unplanted pot in their yard. The response was almost unanimous. We plunkers have all spent endless hours strolling around the garden with a pot in one hand and a trowel in the other, looking for a spot the plant can be crammed into. Then... you get it: plunk! This assumes, of course, that you have already been cured of the malady of actually having any empty spaces.

And it's true that we tend to skirt recommended practices for other things, too, like pruning, for example. The time to prune for us is when we get around to it. Unless you're a total nitwit when it comes to the actual deed, given enough time, the plant will recover from a bad haircut. Just like you and me.

But even if you give them lots of TLC, there are plants that are just plain brats and refuse to perform. My friend Pat and I bought identical blood orange trees from Ned Rahn (Oh, Ned, we do miss you!). Hers bloomed and fruited the following year and for years after. Mine? Nary a single blossom. I decided that being pretty wasn't enough for it to earn its now substantial garden space, so I had what we call in the south, a 'Come to Jesus' meeting. I told it loudly, and in no uncertain terms, that it was through freeloading and was on borrowed time. It had just one more season to shape up and fruit, or I was getting out the chain saw.

The following year, the crop of oranges was so bountiful that I was giving them away like zucchini. This year, too, I will be giving away bushels of them to the HELP food pantry. Tough love works.

When we see an expensive plant we can't live without, we ignore the advice of planting in

groups of three or five. As my friend Alice says, we plant in drifts of one. If a friend gifts us with a plant, even if we don't like it, we plant it anyway. It might grow on you and it's not like the ugly vase from Aunt Sally you can hide in a closet until she visits.

Let's face the truth. Gardening is work. Some of it is genuinely enjoyable and rewarding, but some of it is just plain labor. Neither can you ignore the fact that dirt is dirty and you will be too, if you labor in it long enough. I'm always impressed with Martha Stewart's fingernails. They're never long and brightly polished, but *always, always* neatly trimmed and clean. Which leads me to the inevitable conclusion that she is a superb delegator but not really an Actual Gardener. Even gloves will not protect the avid gardener from jagged, stained and uneven fingernails. Or is it just me? Hmmm. Could be . . .

But back to the ghosts. I've calculated that my plant cemetery would be the size of a runway at La Guardia. I could have retired comfortably several years earlier with the money I spent on plants that met their maker much too soon. Makes me feel very insecure that so many of them seemed to just die rather than endure the continued indignity of my uneven gardening skills. Oh well. That's life (or not!). At least at my house.

So Happy Halloween, y'all. May your house be safe from tigers. And ghosts.

*Sandra*