

I'm Not A Gardener

By Julian (Jules) Perrin

This is true. It didn't happen to a friend of a friend of mine, this happened to me.

I am the first to admit that gardening is not my cup of tea and I would not make a gardener's armpit. I have a black thumb, am tone deaf and two left feet for dancing (But that's another story). As far as gardening is concerned, I have great difficulty telling the difference between a rose, a carnation, a daffodil and a daisy. I know they're all flowers, have pretty colours and a pleasant smell but that's all to me. Seeing a plant with colour instantly tells me that it is a flower of some sort and must be retained. Imagine how much harder it is for me to tell the difference between wanted and unwanted things when they are all green. One green thing looks the same as any other green thing to me.

Weeding is a greater dilemma as some have pretty flowers. My wife hates me weeding because I tend to pull things out then say, "Is this a weed?." That usually gets a good reaction like a lump of dirt between the eyes. It's even worse when I pull out something that was meant to stay. I then frantically dig a small hole and bury, sorry plant, the thing again. "Other way up you idiot", she encouragingly says.

Using politically correct terminology, I am horticulturally challenged. Some people, especially my wife, say I am just a challenge. Others, and again my wife is on the top of the list, say I am just challenged. As far as gardening goes, I am a mobile disaster area.

After much coaching and encouraging threats, the time arrived when my wife sent me out, unsupervised, to do odd jobs around the garden. The brief was to, "Make it look sort of lived in rather than a deserted jungle". Free at last. I'll show her I can garden just as well as any other inept person. I suppose the writing was on the wall but I was like a kid who was able to go to the shop by themselves for the first time.

Well, I started with that background to set the scene for this.

There used to be a bush, as in the past tense, out the back of our place. It was all green but that was OK because Grumbles said it had to stay but it needed pruning. It was on the list in the brief and I was tasked with the job.

Did I mention I was now unsupervised?.

This bushy thing stood about 3 meters high and it was sort of going all fluffy and broad around the edges. A bit like me I suppose; broad in the middle and not much on height. I really believe that I am the right weight, it's just that I am three feet to short. Anyway, Grumbles wanted this bushy thing tidied up a bit. No worries I can do that.

Armed with the implements of destruction I proceeded to skilfully and lightly prune the bush. So I thought.

Who is this "Grumbles" you ask? She is my wife, Sue.

Come on, come on. I can hear you all going crook at me but it's true, husbands, as do wives, address their partner with some form of endearment at various stages during their union. They usually start out with nauseating terms like Honey, Pumpkin, Sweet Lips etc. As time passes, the use of these terms of endearment changes. The actual period of this transition is not clearly defined but as they move towards some of the famous ones like "Her in Doors" or my favourite, "She who must be obeyed.", you know the relationship has matured.

I am not sure what stage I have reached. I would say we have passed the transition stage. Probably well past it I think.

"I bet you don't call her "Grumbles" to her face", I hear you say. The truth is I do and the funny thing about it is that she appreciates the term. Mind you, many of the terms she uses for me are not repeatable in public, nor are they flattering, but all's fair in marriage and war.

Mind you, there are certain terms of endearment that you must avoid at all costs if you value your life in any way. The prime offender is, "Yes dear". This seems to be the universal red rag to all women. If you do use this phrase, you do so with the warning of dire consequences. Also remember, the inflection you put on the term seems to have a huge bearing on your survivability as well. The problem is, that when you're in trouble, it doesn't matter how you say it, it will always invoke a hostile response like, "Don't you, Yes dear me".

Its even worse when there is a group of women around and you respond with "Yes dear". There seems to be an unseen bond and they jointly respond, which I am sure, is instinctive. They all seem to make this communal "Ooh" with a sudden inrush of air. The pack mentality kicks in as they circle and target the weakened, and now vulnerable, prey.

You guys know what I am talking about. If you use this term, no matter how innocently, the feeling of impending doom invades the room, the hairs on your neck stand on end, you instantly go on your guard and frantically search the room for avenues of escape. The classic fight or flight responses take effect. Surveying the scene you realise that you are desperately out numbered even at two to one. Immediate capitulation is the only foreseeable safe avenue left. The alternative is death by the stoppage of privileges or disassociation and even worse, cancellation of the beer allowance.

Where was I? Oh yes, gardening. While clearing up the debris after the pruning job, I proudly surveyed the scene. I thought I'd done a good job for my first major, unsupervised, pruning operation. Remember she left me unsupervised. That's important evidence in pleading my defence later.

The trouble is the supervisor didn't agree that I had achieved the outcome she expected. She felt that reducing a bush to a single stick does not constitute a good pruning job. "But," I cried in a whiney voice, "the bush doesn't take up so much space now. Isn't that why you wanted it pruned in the first place?"

This did not go over well. Never question the meaning of a woman's specifications. Especially when you, in their eyes, have just perpetrated some horrendous action.

"It will grow back" I pleaded.

I think at this point I should have quietly submitted to my punishment. My grave was still shallow enough to get out of in time. But no, I doggedly continued my defence.

Changing tack I went on the offensive and said that the requirements for the exercise were not clearly and succinctly defined. Prune the bush, as a project requirement, allows huge variations and deviations on the original brief. Now if she had said to cut off some leaves and keep the branches I would understand. But this is, in my mind, not pruning. That's trimming or manicuring. Pruning means do some serious cutting by taking any bits sticking out of the thing and cart it away.

I was politely informed, through clenched teeth, that secateurs are used for pruning bushes, not chainsaws.

My grave was only three feet deep at this point.

I informed her that there are companies, and whole industries, which are founded on the idea of providing powered machines to assist in mowing and even pruning. These devices are intentionally provided to make the job fun, to ease the mundane task of cutting green stuff and to speed up any cutting process. Everything that these mechanical devices are designed to cut, is green. Green grass with mower, green hedges with a hedger and green bushes with a chainsaw.

While on a roll, I sermonised my deeply pondered logic that if its green and it needs keeping, it should be guarded in some way against accidental cutting. I continued with this theory and said that all gardens should have raised edges so that a mower cannot easily cross. People who put garden beds at the same level with the grass have no excuse. These gardens just become speed humps in the mowing cycle.

I must admit that Grumbles did learn early on, after losing her favourite rose bush, that if anything is to survive my mower, it has to be in a defined garden bed.

My grave now was way above my head. Stupidly I didn't stop there. I tried the approach that it was her fault because I was unsupervised. Wrong move.

So, how did the pruned bush go, I hear you ask? Well, two years after the pruning exercise the bush is starting to grow back. It doesn't look like a stick so much any more: it's now a green stick. Grumbles is talking to me again and maybe in a couple more years I will be forgiven.

I knew the bush would grow back and was very tempted to say "I told you so". I believe my instincts for self preservation dominated and I didn't mention it again.

Re-earning your wings to undertake unsupervised gardening is a slow process. Only just recently I was allowed to use scissors on the grass unsupervised. One step at a time.

So next time you're contemplating doing some unsupervised pruning in the garden, spare a thought for poor old Jules and make sure the requirements for the pruning are clearly defined and specific to prolong your harmonious existence on earth.