





Self-Seeders

Mother Nature is Lady Bountiful to those who work with her; Cruella De Vil to those who don't. She freely gives gifts of seedlings, knowing which ones flourish. At times our tastes clash—a normal parent-child relationship. When we agree, I'm blessed.

In the kitchen garden, both clary sage and leeks flower and scatter seed in their second summer for the following year's blooms.

When I let her have her way, the garden almost cares for itself. As I age, our relationship has grown deeper, more loving, and more respectful.

I've learned not to be too quick to deadhead flowers. "Let the seeds fall where they may" is my motto, at least until I get to know a plant's habits. Self-sowing plants may be charming or exasperating, but they're almost always unpredictable. Sometimes I've found new hybrids, especially among the hellebores and columbines. Sometimes a hybrid—a morning glory, for example—drops a seed that reverts back to a species.

I welcome self-seeders, some might say foolishly, with open arms; they save time, money, and energy. Tomatoes, lupines, foxgloves, sweet William, love-in-a-mist, hellebores, clary sage, black-eyed Susans, and forget-me-nots are a few of the plants I never have enough of, even though they freely give of themselves. I can always squeeze another seedling into one of my gardens.

However, sorting out Mother Nature's gifts in their many guises takes practice and a discerning eye to distinguish a weed from a desirable plant. Once I began letting them have their way, flowers bloomed where I hadn't thought it possible—pansies in the gravel driveway, sunflowers between the paving stones, forget-me-nots (the most cooperative of all) anywhere they touch the earth.

You can rationalize anything!

Cleome, planted the summer before, reseeded among the tomatoes; I let some stay and transplanted others.





Embracing Annual Reseeders

One friend has called me a permissive gardener. And it is true. I like to see what a plant is going to do before I start pushing it around. Sometimes I already know.

Last summer I spied some tomato seedlings under a hedge of roses planted to hide the trash bin. No one goes near it unless they are emptying the trash, and I can cut rose blooms from it to my heart's content, with no concern about damaging a garden ensemble. The tomato seeds had lurked in the compost I emptied under the roses. Out of the compost emerged a plum tomato plant, a currant tomato plant, and a cherry tomato plant—an excellent kitchen garden selection. The roses embraced the tomatoes as they grew and supported the tomato vines until they reached more than 5 feet—nature's own tomato cage! These self-seeded tomatoes began ripening the second week of September, when the kitchen garden tomatoes were finishing, so I was able to pick tomatoes and roses together for the dinner table. An admirable partnership.

Often the places that tomatoes germinate are better suited to their needs than the places I choose. I assume they move around the beds with the help of the fat rodents—perish the thought—that leave half-eaten tomatoes here and there. Per-

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haps it's the work of my friends the birds. As a rule, tomatoes are not relished by critters, but I have found a half-eaten green tomato balanced on the railing of the playhouse; I suspect it was deposited there by a gray squirrel that frequents that spot. Other plants sprout where tomatoes fall off the vine and rot. Seeds can, and often do, stay in the soil for many months or even years before they germinate.

In the kitchen garden, I rely heavily on flowers that reseed. I'll religiously deadhead the dahlias to encourage more bloom, but rarely do I deadhead the annuals. Last year cleome seeded itself between the tomato cages at one end of the row and the amaranth at the other. Because the tomato leaves are often blemished, ragged, and disheveled by the time I pick the fruit, the cleome was a welcome camouflage and a distraction from the tomatoes' scruffiness.

Snow-on-the-mountain (*Euphorbia marginata*) is an annual I haven't planted for years. Last summer, one plant showed up unannounced. I must have brought up a dormant seed, deeply buried a few years ago, during spring planting. (I am reminded of the fields of red poppies that bloomed across northern France and Belgium at the end of World War I. The skirmishes of war disturbed their sleep, and their poignant return symbolized the blood that was shed.) I love the beauty of its soft green leaves unevenly outlined in white, as if painted by the hand of a child. Still, you have to take care with snow-on-the-mountain. Growing it is easy, but it can be troublesome when snipped for flower arrangements. Poisonous white sap oozes out and may cause a skin rash similar to that of poison ivy. The sap flow can be stopped by dipping the cut stem briefly in boiling water or searing it with a match. Otherwise, sap can clog the stems of the other flowers in the arrangement and prevent water absorption. I have been handling snow-on-the-mountain for years and luckily have never had a problem. (However, if I merely *look* at poison ivy, I start to itch.)

Clary sage (*Salvia sclarea*) is a controversial member of the salvia family member. It is loved from afar for its beauty but can be a stinker—literally—up close. Its odor is antiseptic (the best that can be said for it), but its beauty is arresting. As far as I am concerned, it is welcome to roam the kitchen garden, where, as a hardy biennial, it blooms early in its second year. The showy, inch-long translucent flowers are softly tinted with pink and purple tones. They bloom in whorls around the 3- to 4-foot stems. When I spy clary sage seedlings, I might move them to the formal garden for their glory days, then pull them up when their leaves start to rust.

a garden vignette

A few years ago, I was digging out a lupine for transplanting when a toad leaped from under its roots. Toads, it turns out, are fond of covering themselves with soil. After I recovered my breath, I welcomed him. Toads are a blessing in a garden. They find insects a gustatory delight. But I'd appreciate a little warning first.

Love-in-a-mist (*Nigella damascena*) quickly blooms from seed. Sometimes it reseeds and blooms three times in a year.



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