

Encora Imparo

Words to live—and garden—by.
By Laurel Radomski



Me: “Honey, can you cut down that ugly pine tree in the back yard, please?”

He: “Sure, no problem.”

Me: “Honey, please cut down the ugly tree.”

He: “Yeah. It’s on my list.”

Me: “When are you going to cut that tree down?”

He: “I’m getting to it.”

*T*his conversation took place over a period of several weeks. Eventually, I realized I would have to take matters into my own hands. So one day when Ed was at work, I went looking for a weapon. I saw the old chainsaw Ed’s father had given him. Now I’m not real smart, but I’m not real stupid, either. I knew that if I attempted to use that heavy, temperamental chainsaw, I was more likely to cut off a body part than a tree limb. So I went with the next biggest saw I could find in the garage—a keyhole saw. That tree was coming down even if I had to cut it one twig at a time. By the time Ed came home from work, I had trimmed off all the branches I could reach. The tree was still standing, but at least it was a lot slimmer! Ed took one look at me, went to the garage, and revved up the chainsaw. One swipe—and the pine was down.

“Why didn’t you tell me you wanted that tree cut down?” He said.

*T*hus began my foray into gardening.

I knew when we moved into the house that I wanted to





be able to look out any window and see all manner of flowers and foliage. Considering that we had bought a house on a barren lot (if you don't count the Jack pine trees), my dream appeared to be just that: a dream. However, after that first tree came down, I got to work. All I needed to do was scrape the sod off of the area where I wanted a garden and plant, right? Never mind that we had sand for soil, that I had never read a gardening magazine or book, and that I didn't have a clue what I was doing. I was pretty sure it couldn't be that difficult.

I chose a spot, removed the sod, and transplanted some ditch lilies—which, of course, grew quite well, because ditch lilies grow anywhere. I felt victorious!

I started ordering from every garden catalog I got, taking little note of zones or water needs or growing conditions. Every new

and wonderful plant I read about, I had to have.

I'm not going to mention how much money I lost to my dream.

And that's just the plants! Every spin-ny, flower-y, bug-gy, sil-ly garden ornament the stores sold showed up in my gardens. It looked like a dollar store had thrown up in my yard.

But I persisted. I started reading gardening magazines and books. I learned about amending the soil, compost, zones, and growing needs—all the important things a successful gardener needs to know. As the garden grows, so does the gardener, they say. I'm here to say the reverse is equally true.

Twelve years later, the cheap tacky stuff is all gone, and I am slowly finding my voice in the gardens that surround my house. Each year, I get rid of more grass and replace it with more color. I subscribe to the wabi-sabi Japanese theory that there is beauty in imperfection. I like rustic, handmade, repurposed garden art. If something breaks or rots, that's fine. Nothing lasts forever, nor is it meant to. My gardens are not perfect by any means. Perfect is perfectly boring.

I work in a factory. Everything there feels gray. When I drive onto my street at the end of the day, I see perfectly clipped lawns, all the same, monotonous green. I can see my own oasis half a block away—because it has a veritable riot of color. Armillaries stand tall, with clematis, American bittersweet, roses, and wisteria twining up, around, and through them. Miscanthus with their lovely seed heads wave in the breeze, much like my gray hair waves at me in the mirror each morning. Popcorn and gourds mingle with cosmos, lilies, sea holly, and blanket flowers. Even in winter, my garden catches the eye. Cardinals, blue jays, finches, woodpeckers, and other birds feast on the beautiful rose hips and the orange and red bittersweet seeds. The snow rests on the armillaries and frosts the dark brown twigs of the Diablo Ninebarks.

Encora Imparo — "I'm still learning"

These are words said by Michelangelo in his 87th year. Words painted on a chair in my garden.

Words I live by. ❖