

Marriage

the garden of



BY JOHN W. NICHOLS

Successful gardening and building a marriage have much in common. The vigilant gardener knows when to water, fertilize, and prune. His hard work today pays off with a vibrant garden in the future. A marriage, just like the garden, requires effort. Timely care and attention to detail will enrich the couple's experience as their relationship thrives.

The successful gardener chooses carefully.

Real estate experts say "location is everything", and that truth holds in the garden. Every gardener has relocated a plant to find a spot that better suits its needs. Plants that languish in one location may prosper in another. Does the plant require full sun, partial sun, or shade? Is it compatible with the growing habits of its neighbors? Through research and trial and error the gardener discovers the secrets.

A successful marriage demands that partners study one another. The husband learns the circumstances that bring out the best in his wife and works to foster her growth. Likewise the wife gains understanding of her husband's ambitions and supports his efforts.

In the healthiest marriages the couples meet each other's needs then look outward to serve God and others through the family, church, and community. Partnering to benefit neighbors reinforces the couple's awareness that they are part of the universe, not its center.

The successful gardener prepares diligently.

Garden visitors marvel at the beauty of the blooms, but the part of the plant buried under the soil makes that display possible. Roots matter. Strong, healthy roots require good soil and the correct nutrients. Compost mixed into the bed with the

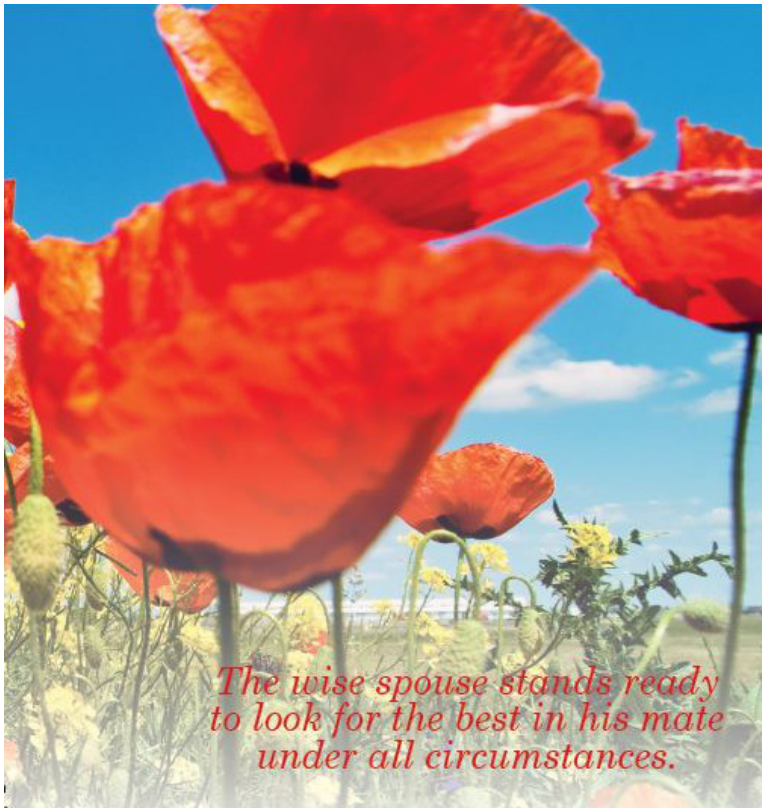
gardener's sweat increases the likelihood of healthy plants. The hard work of removing rocks and breaking up soil boosts the spread of roots.

Marriage languishes in nutrient-free soil. Life presses with unrelenting stress, and the pleasant memories of falling in love succumb to the daily grind. Marriage partners must improve their soil. Growing couples schedule time together and enjoy their dates long after the wedding ceremony. Love notes tucked into a lunch bag or taped to the dashboard initiate smiles, happy thoughts, and love in return. Kind words, a gentle touch, and thoughtful acts strengthen the marriage.

The successful gardener waters wisely.

Gardens suffer during seasons of drought. Dust-caked leaves shrivel, buds refuse to bloom, and plants wither. Heat swirls as soil hardens and cracks. The garden needs water, and the gardener joins the farmer in praying for rain. Hope is lost without that water, and years of effort may be erased in a single season.

A marriage has good times and bad. Neglect and hurtful words singe feelings and spread drought through the relation-



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ship. Only soothing drops of understanding and forgiveness can set things right. The wise spouse stands ready to look for the best in his mate under all circumstances.

The successful gardener cultivates consistently.

The gardener invests hours among his plants as he observes progress and inspects for problems. He breaks the soil so water can soak down to the roots. Often on his knees he removes weeds before they choke out tender plants. Jesus explained the deadly habits of thorns in Mark 4:7. Watchfulness is as important as pruners to the gardener.

Maintaining a thriving marriage requires regular checkups. Spouses reminisce about the past, discuss the present, and plan their future. Mutually shared goals, often the output of long talks, set the overall direction for the relationship. Issues are addressed, not ignored to spread and choke the love. Alert partners repel stress, time crunches, demanding outsiders, hobbies, careers, or anything that may crowd the couple's relationship.

The successful gardener waits patiently.

Some seasons bring ideal gardening conditions, and the showy flowers draw praise from visitors. Other seasons are less spectacular, but the gardener never quits. He tends, plans, and plants. Time is the currency of gardening, and the gardener's investment is never wasted.

Spouses weather sparse seasons and hope for a brighter future. Their commitment to one another is long-term, and patience is the key. In the garden of marriage the practices of choosing, preparing, watering, cultivating, and waiting beat quitting every time. JL



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