

SPRING BOOKS

IN 2018 CATIE MARRON, a contributing editor at *Vogue* magazine, an expert on public squares and urban green spaces, and an accomplished fundraiser for the New York Public Library and the High Line, decided to become a gardener.

She and her husband, longtime residents of Manhattan, had recently purchased a dream house in rural Connecticut. It was a place large enough for them and their two children as well as family generations to come. Although she had fallen in love with the countryside, especially the rolling hills around the property and the secluded lake at its edge, Ms. Marron didn't quite feel she belonged to the place, or it to her. She at last concluded that "to feel rooted, I had to put down roots. Literally." After a lifetime of reading the classics of garden and landscape literature, and with a head full of personal memories of wonderful gardens she had visited over the years, she felt compelled to "root [herself] to the land," beginning by turning its soil.

In "**Becoming a Gardener: What Reading and Digging Taught Me About Living**" (Harper Design, 245 pages, \$60), this consummately bookish former city woman, suddenly with access to her own "outside," tells how, over the next 18 months, she came to relish the sensation of what Virginia Woolf called "chocolate earth in our nails."

Designing and creating the garden drew on her many talents, especially as she began to think of it in architectural terms, as something akin to her new house. "The soil was the foundation. The fencing created its walls and helped determine the garden's size. The garden beds were the rooms. Its paths were the halls and the flowers and vegetables the furniture."

In addition to borrowing ideas from the house, the hills and the lake (what Alexander Pope would call "the genius of the place"), she was eager to borrow ideas from books. Of course she read many technical manuals, and later (necessarily) enlisted the help of several "hands-on, real-life gardeners" who become her "garden mentors." But mainly she read not for gardening instruction, but for gardening *wisdom*. "Where do gardeners get their inspiration? What is the meaning of gardens in their lives? How will I know when I'm a gardener?" Answers and insights came from writers as diverse as Cicero and Rousseau; Vita Sackville-West and Gertrude Jekyll; Eleanor Perényi, Henry Mitchell, Penelope Lively and Jamaica Kincaid—all quoted here at length and to moving effect.



Soon after she began to create her garden, tragedy struck when Don, her husband of over 30 years, died in December 2019. Only a few months later, the world shut down as the Covid pandemic struck. During that winter, upon returning to the house for the first time since the funeral, she went out to check on the garden, wondering if something she'd read would prove true, Clare Leighton's observation that "there is great healing power in digging." After turning over a few chunks of cold soil with her trowel and detecting the scent of fresh earth, she "felt my roots taking form even though the very root system of my life—my relationship with Don—was gone."

Beginning this book in September 2020, a full year after her first harvest (carrots and radishes, broccoli and cauliflower, salad greens, herbs and flowers and more), she is certain that the garden has increased her "sense of well-being and happiness." Like so many others, especially during the awful times of the pandemic, she came to understand the peace and solace of working one's own plot of soil: "As Alfred Austin, the poet laureate of Britain from 1896 to 1913, once wrote, 'We come from the earth, we return to the earth, and in between we garden.'"

When she is gardening, Ms. Marron writes, "all my skills are engaged and my whole being is involved" in what some call "work joy." (It is a joy, by the way, that spills over into her attention to the details of bookmaking. Her acknowledgments suggest that she had right of approval in every aspect of this large-format volume's sumptuous production, from the commissioning of full-color photographs from William Abranowicz and spirited gouaches from the Nordic design studio All the Way to Paris, to the choice of reproductions of classic artworks by Gustave Caillebotte, Childe Hassam, Ellsworth Kelly and many others.)

Ms. Marron has lately developed more ease in her garden, learning to be less self-critical. "At the end of the day, I am someone who gardens, and that's enough for me." Would she advise others to begin a gardening project of their own? She answers, wholeheartedly, "Yes. It will bring you life."

—Ms. Robinson is the author of "Heroes of Horticulture."