

# Determined to build a garden this year, I found inspiration in books

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PUBLISHED MARCH 18, 2021  
UPDATED 1 DAY AGO



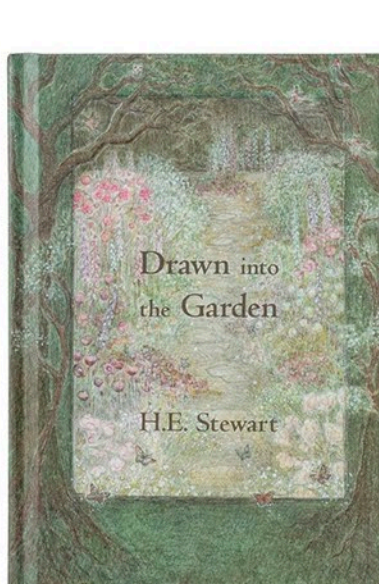
"I think if you're going to find faith in one's meaning in life and the continuation of life force and energy, I think the place that you can come closest to it is in a garden," says poet Lorna Crozier, whose garden in Victoria is shown.

LORNA CROZIER/HANDOUT

Whatever the opposite of a green thumb is, that is what I've got. It's not just that I extinguish any plant that comes into my care – even the ones I am assured are particularly hardy, almost unkillable. It's that I don't have the level of knowledge that would lead to their proper care – nor, at this point anyway, the bandwidth to acquire it. At the same time, I fantasize about having a beautiful – or at the very least, not embarrassing – garden. And as we head into a second pandemic summer, I think I am finally going to make my move.

My landscaping fantasies may be motivated by the pandemic, but they are informed by literature. The magnificent and terrifying gardens we read about in books – from childhood, they enchant. The landscapes of *Anne of Green Gables* ("the orchard on the slope below the house was in a bridal flush of pinky-white bloom, hummed over by a myriad of bees") and *Little Women* (lush descriptions of the girls' gardens: "sweet peas and mignonette, larkspur, pinks, pansies, and southernwood ... honeysuckle and morning-glories hanging their colored horns and bells in graceful wreaths ... tall white lilies, delicate ferns"), *The Little Prince's* ephemeral rose, even the deep, dark fairy tale forests of *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Hansel and Gretel*. It was all so different from and much more exciting than the suburban backyards of my neighbourhood.

So when *Drawn into the Garden* – an illustrated book by West Coast artist and garden expert Helen Stewart – arrived on my doorstep, I looked at the pictures and read the descriptions, and started dreaming. She writes about creating her Victoria garden as "a way of creating a three-dimensional painting on a grand scale, the ideal approach for an artist, both creating and working with an image." Why shouldn't I be able to have that?



STEFAN CREMERS/HANDOUT

My doorstep, I should say, is garden-adjacent. I live in a duplex and have only a front yard. And by yard, I mean a little rectangle. It's on a busy corner and I had never thought of it as very usable space. Until last summer, when it became the site of all social gatherings. It was certainly good enough for a glass of al fresco wine with a couple of non-household contacts. But now into year two of this, I'm hoping for something a little less unsightly. Right now it's a sloping mess of sporadic grass overgrown and nearly dead plants, too few river rocks not quite covering the sewer hole. It's a lot of mess for such a tiny patch of land.

"I don't want it to look so junky," is how I put it to one landscaper, Keith Rivard, who came over to have a look.

I don't really know how to describe what I want. I don't even know what I want it to look like. I just know that I want it to be a place I want to be.

"I think you could create a really cozy little oasis," he assured me.

Stewart's property on Vancouver Island is obviously nothing like mine – it's an acre, with benches, a pool, winding paths and secret spots. Still, I called her up, thinking maybe I could apply some of her bucolic wisdom to my little urban plot.



Artist and writer Helen Stewart stands with Mossy, her Bearded Collie, in her garden in Victoria. Stewart's book *Drawn into the Garden* celebrates the meditative power of being a gardener in a noisy world.

STEFAN CREMERS/HANDOUT

"I planted my garden as if I was making a painting. So each little part, I would study it. And I only planted plants that I wanted to draw," she told me.

"My garden doesn't have the same feeling as other people's gardens, and I think that is because I am an artist. And because I planned it like I was planning and painting. And of course, it keeps changing, and things get too big and you have to take things out and they die. So it's like a painting that's always changing."



An image of peonies from Stewart's book *Drawn into the Garden*.

HANDOUT

After our talk, she was off to deal with a pile of compost she described as both enormous and beautiful.

The conversation was so inspirational – even if I didn't really have a better sense of what I actually needed to do – that I thought to contact a few other authors who have written about gardens. Not how-to manuals, but books where the garden is a central theme.

"You should really tend to the garden the way you tend to your story," said Patricia Storms, speaking a language I could understand. "As much as you love something, if it doesn't fit the story, it doesn't belong. You have to cut a lot of excess words. And weeding is part of doing that to your garden." Also, she added, moving things around until they're finally in the right spot, "just like you would move paragraphs."

Storms's upcoming children's book *The Dog's Gardener* was inspired by a large garden she saw while vacationing in Port Hope, Ont. But her own yard in Toronto has been story-worthy as well, weathering to varying degrees several disasters: Pipes that needed to be dug up after a flooded basement, old tile tossed down from a neighbour's roofing job, concrete from a basement renovation that spilled all over her plantings.



The *Dog's Gardener* was inspired by a large garden Patricia Storms saw while vacationing in Port Hope, Ont.

NATHALIE DION/HANDOUT

"I would say having a sense of humour has helped," she told me with a laugh. "And also the whole thing about learning to let go of things. Once you write a story, you've got to let it go.

"It's a relationship with the earth," she continued.

"You can't fight it. You can't force things to happen."

St. John's-based poet Mary Germaine was walking to work one fine day when she noticed how beautiful the flowers were looking. "Congratulations, rhododendrons" she thought. And that became the first line of the first poem of her debut collection – and its title – on sale April 6.

Germaine says other than a proficiency at weeding, she is not a gardener. But she is an appreciator – and finds inspiration in nature.

"Especially in the pandemic, I don't think I'm alone in this, gardens have been a real refuge," she says from her St. John's apartment, where she has no garden, but where a dark pink rose bush is blooming on her kitchen table. "And they're a place where things are orderly but not too orderly. There's a balance between control and wildness in a garden that is very comforting."

A personal favourite work of literature about this topic is Patrick Lane's memoir *There Is a Season*, which I read for the first time shortly after he died in 2019. It's his story of emerging from rehab and working through that difficult time by tending his garden. It's a timely reminder about what a garden can do for the soul in difficult times – the rebirth.

And it doesn't have to encompass a large property, he pointed out. It can be three containers of red geraniums on a high-rise apartment balcony, a single petunia in a pot on a windowsill, a thimble planted with moss.

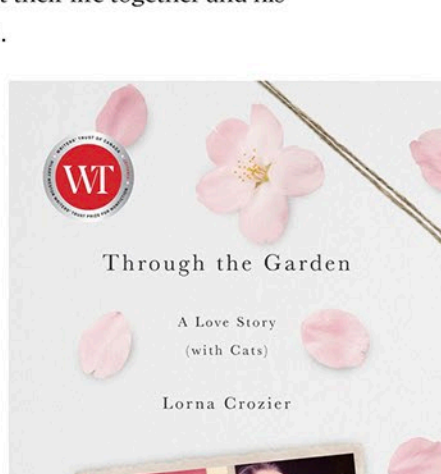


Lorna Crozier, who wrote the memoir *Through the Garden: A Love Story (With Cats)*, says she loves weeding the garden at her Victoria home.

LORNA CROZIER/HANDOUT

The poet Lorna Crozier, Lane's wife, reminded me of that passage when I spoke with her this week about the memoir she wrote about their life together and his illness, *Through the Garden: A Love Story (with Cats)*.

"I was thinking about why gardens are so important, particularly to writers," she said. "We try to answer the big questions, the ones that have to do with life and death and loss and do we mean anything in the world? And I think those questions are most at hand, and most accessible in a garden.



Through the Garden: A Love Story (with Cats) by Lorna Crozier.

KATSUMI MUROUCHI/PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE CANADA

"Because everything is going on all at once. One plant is blooming. The one beside it is just died. The one next to that is pushing ... through the earth. ... So there's all of this fecundity and decay, rubbing up against each other side by side. And that's that we're trying to get at, in whatever we're writing: how do we keep on going when we know death is at the end of it?"

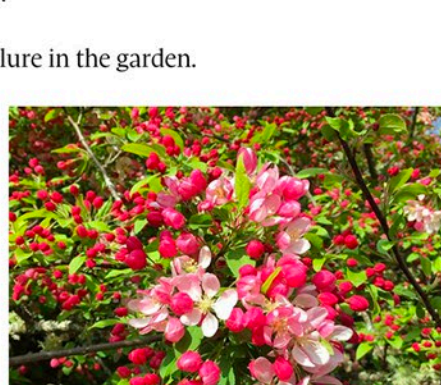
Crozier – another poet who loves to weed (coincidence?) – told me she didn't know what she would have done during Lane's illness without having that space to go to, to work in.

"I think if you're going to find faith in one's meaning in life and the continuation of life force and energy, I think the place that you can come closest to it is in a garden."

She believes gardens connect us to the primal. "Because when you put your hands in the earth, something happens to you. You are literally connected to the earth. But I think you are metaphorically and spiritually too."

She also reminded me that everybody experiences failure in the garden.

"You can't have just a garden of the mind," she added. "That's what writing's like: ideas mean nothing; you have to find the body for the ideas and the body is language."



Flowers blooming in Crozier's garden.

LORNA CROZIER/HANDOUT

Looking for some language – and ideas – for my garden, I showed my sad little space to another expert this week. Garden designer Jane Sandison assured me it could become a more inviting, private space – more than something I just walk past to get into the house. And she had me change my narrative.

"Everybody's wanting to spend more time outdoors," she said, because of the pandemic. "It's sort of forced us to kind of look at our outdoor space and go wow, okay, I have this. How lucky am I to have this?"

After she left, I looked around. I did feel lucky. A single purple crocus was pushing through the ground. And the magnolia tree, one of my little garden's existing true delights – until I have to rake up the petals – is just starting to bud. I can detect the tiniest bit of pink. Spring, I thought. It's coming.

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