

A Garden Journal – Purpose and Benefits

by Carolee James

I have a friend who, every night before going to sleep, writes in her private journal. Another friend starts a journal whenever she takes a trip. She fills the pages with not only the adventures of her trip, but also with mementos picked up along the way, like postcards, photos, pressed flowers, etc.

As the weather warms and we start a new gardening season, you might consider keeping a garden journal. Many of the beautiful gardens throughout the world would have been lost forever had it not been for garden journals. Some started with noted landscaper's plans; others began life as doodles on a sheet of paper. Owners kept a rich and detailed account of all the work that created the garden—every plant, seasonal changes, what worked, what changed and what was planned for the future. These detailed accounts survived the years and, after gardens were destroyed by wars and neglect, new owners found the documentation to restore them to their full glory.

Start your garden journal by detailing what your landscape looked like before you put your mark on it. This could be a drawing of the area you intend to landscape or just a rough outline of your property, showing existing structures and plants.

Then you might describe your vision for your garden. Do you want garden 'rooms,' a cutting garden, or an old fashioned English garden, a play area, a gazebo or a birdbath? Whatever you decide, as you start to garden you'll see a plan emerging that you'll refine as each month and year goes by.

Starting a journal today, you can begin with how long you've have been working on your garden and what changes you see in the future. However you start, you'll look back years later and feel proud of what you've accomplished.

The benefits of keeping a garden journal are many. Chronicle how the garden evolved, how it's growing, setbacks that occur, what plants don't work and which ones thrive. As your garden grows, the microclimates within your garden will change. Where once a corner of the garden received full morning sun, now—because the tree you planted has grown so beautifully—that corner is in shade and the sun-loving plants may have to be replaced with shade-lovers.

How old are those plants? Will they be easy to move? Look to the journal for that information. Often we are surprised by how long a plant has been in the ground. Take pictures and include them in your journal to show the growth rate of plants. Or just to show how beautiful one year's bloom was.

What does one use for a journal? Whatever works for you. I started with a spiral bound notebook, went to a blank-paged bound book and then to a beautiful garden journal given to me as a gift. This garden journal requested too much information for me to detail, so—as beautiful as it is—I've reverted to my spiral bound notebook!

What does one record in a garden journal? Besides planting, pruning, fertilizing, and transplanting information, I record my observations about the garden. How combinations of plant foliage, texture and color are a joy to behold. How magical the flower of the soaproot plant is when viewed in the evening dusk. Recalling how the cedar bees and hummingbirds vie for flowers on the salvias. And last year seeing the tiny blue butterflies flittering above and on the blooms of the native Yerba Santa bush. Such loveliness must be savored again and again.

I also keep a spiral bound notebook that I usually take with me once a week when I walk around the garden, noting what needs to be done or where I can tuck in a new plant. In addition I list interesting plants I've read about, pictures of walkways I like, and garden tips and tricks I want to try. On the back pages of this notebook I list those plants, especially natives, which are thriving in the garden and the non-natives never, ever to buy. I take this notebook on shopping trips to the nursery as a handy reference should I see something that fits my future plans.

If you truly enjoy the garden you're creating, maintaining a garden journal will insure that future owners of your garden will know how to care for and respect all of your devoted hard work.

Carolee James, a Master Gardener since 1998, has kept a garden journal for many years. She only wishes she had kept one from the inception of her gardening experiences.