

The Groundhog Wars

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The first inkling of trouble came the morning I looked across to the neighbour's yard and saw a furry brown animal about the size of a cat, eating the neighbour's hostas. How cute, I thought to myself as I watched it munching quickly and nervously, constantly stopping to look furtively over its shoulder and then moving on to another juicy leaf. Being mostly cityfolk, I thought it might be a badger or a porcupine and I called my partner Tony over to the window to see it. He wasn't sure either, but with the help of the Internet, we identified it as a groundhog. We agreed it made an unusual addition to our tally of squirrels, cats, birds, snails, frogs and general wildlife in our backyard and thought no more about it.

Completely oblivious to the looming menace, we went ahead and planted some vegetable seeds for the first time. I'd found some seed packages in the freezer whose "best before" date was five years ago. With the fresh tang of new buds sweetening the spring air and the snow finally gone, I felt reckless and sowed radishes, broccoli, lettuce, spinach and snow peas in wild abandon, figuring I'd be lucky if anything grew. I'd never gardened before and I wasn't sure if I'd maintain interest enough to water and weed all summer long. But I couldn't bring myself to throw the seeds out and even if none of these seeds grew, they weren't so terrifically exciting that I'd be terribly disappointed. It was all just for fun.

The very next morning, before getting dressed, before having tea, even before saying "good morning" to my mate, I rushed out side in my pajamas and examined the pots. Nothing. And nothing the morning after. I got more leisurely by the third morning and by the fourth, I almost forgot to look, preferring to sniff the fresh early morning air and watch the cardinal singing his heart out on top of the neighbour's roof. When I did look and noticed the pot with the radishes filled with tiny, fragile green shoots, I was ecstatic. The next day, little broccoli leaves appeared and after that, lettuce. I was proud, excited and now anxious about all these little babies.

We expanded our repertoire after exploring a fabulous local nursery. We arrived back home loaded down with flats of pansies, marigolds, lobelias, coleus,

gazania and plans to return for more! We'd become Gardeners! The next few days we spent planting furiously. We created a flower bed by a fence and filled it with delphiniums and lilies. We carefully arranged concentric circles of gold marigolds and blue lobelia in old wooden tubs, alternated red coleus and purple gazanias in window boxes and placed gloriously multi-coloured pansies in boxes and pots everywhere. And I started more lettuce and broccoli seeds indoors. By the end of it all, we had sore backs and grubby fingernails, but the deck and yard looked bright and festive. Believing that the hard work was done, I looked forward to a summer of wandering through the yard, watering, pruning and enjoying all our posies, and harvesting and eating our vegetables.

I'd seen the groundhog a few more mornings, still at the neighbour's yard and once, scurrying under our shed, but nothing registered, until the morning after we'd completed all our planting. I went out onto the deck and saw with satisfaction, the radishes growing taller practically by the minute, while the snow peas shot up and the lettuce multiplied. I walked over to the flower bed to check on the lilies and gasped with uncomprehending horror, as I saw one of the lilies had been stripped almost bare. All the delicately pointed purple-green leaves had disappeared, leaving only three naked stems. A fourth still bravely maintained its foliage, which only made the other stems look that much more vulnerable. I looked about in shock for the culprit, but of course, I was alone. Then the image of the furtively-chomping, waddling groundhog rose in my mind and I knew at once who was responsible.

We had a roll of decorative green wire fencing hanging around, so we quickly arranged it to surround the lilies and delphiniums, figuring the groundhog was too fat to push through it. We'd protected our territory, we thought, and satisfied, we brushed the dirt from our gardening gloves, confident the groundhog would choose to eat the surrounding wildflowers and weeds which had much easier access.

The next morning, however, my cries of despair brought Tony running. The lilies were fine, but the window boxes sitting on the deck that had been filled with deep purple, brilliant blue and golden yellow pansies were nothing but stubby, headless green stems. We stood there for a moment, dumbfounded, when I caught sight of the wooden half-barrel down the hill. "Oh no!" I wailed, and rushed to the scene of the crime. The tub with its artistic circles of marigolds, coleus and lobelia now looked like a forest after a fire had burned through. Naked stems stood shivering in the brisk, early morning air. On the ground nearby, several yellow-orange marigold heads lay, wantonly discarded.

We stood mournful and silent, hugging each other and surveying the damage. A sudden movement in the corner of my eye drew my attention to the far side of the yard. I pointed in disbelief and whispered fiercely "He's there! Watching us! Do you believe the nerve?"

“Where?” Tony whispered back. “Are you sure?”

“There!” I pointed again. “He knows we’re talking about him!” We crept up closer and closer until he suddenly disappeared. Walking right up to the chain link fence we could see a wide, deep hole in the ground, right where he’d vanished. Gaps between the fence and the ground showed where he could get between the yards easily enough, but there was a whole section of fence that had fallen down as well, and he could take his pick of entry points.

We walked back towards the house and stood once more on the deck surveying our decimated plants. “There he is again!” I pointed and then suddenly “Oh no! There *she* is!” I moaned, for right beside the large groundhog, two much smaller animals also emerged from the burrow. “It’s a family!”

Much depressed, we went back into the house to re-evaluate. Another search of the Internet revealed the groundhog’s persistent and, to farmers and gardeners, destructive behaviour. Its natural predator, the coyote, doesn’t patrol downtown Orillia and the city doesn’t offer a trapping service. Groundhogs were beyond the Humane Society’s purview and pest control businesses were going to charge fees larger than we could afford. We decided to approach our neighbours, on whose property the burrow hole opened. Finding them watering their front lawn after having recently filled their planters with brightly coloured flowers, we were hopeful their gardening instincts would propel them to share in the cost of transplanting the animals to rugged parkland, a few kilometres away.

“Did you know you have groundhogs?” Tony began.

“Oh, yes,” the wife replied smiling genially, still watering her lawn.

“Have you seen the babies?” put in the husband. “They’re so cute!”

We outlined the damage we’d sustained and suggested we were thinking about removing them, but that the burrow was on their land.

“Go ahead. Feel free to get them, but as long as you don’t hurt them,” the man answered, turning away, no longer interested.

“As long as you use live traps,” the wife answered seriously as she too, moved away, training her hose on another part of the lawn.

“So,” Tony sighed, as we walked back home. “No help there.”

We went back inside the house and began preparing supper. I sat at the kitchen table, looking morosely out the window, thinking that I really wasn’t a gardener. I imagined all the farmers around the world who routinely fight off groundhogs, deer, birds and other pests, not to mention the variety of bugs that threaten their

harvests, and I felt overwhelmed by my situation and a new respect for theirs. I renewed my resolve to pay willingly the higher prices for organically grown food, happy to support farmers who were much more skilled in dealing with all these stresses. In the midst of these musings, suddenly my fork clattered to my plate. Tony looked up from the stove bewildered as I charged out of the kitchen and out the door, clapping my hands and shouting "There he...she is!! Get out get out get out!!" I'd seen the groundhog stroll towards the wooden tub again and I just couldn't bear it. I had to save my crops!

We declared War on the groundhogs, in spite of our normal "live and let live" policies. Straightaway, we chopped through thick weeds in order to straighten out the fallen down fence. We got rolls of chicken wire mesh and fortified the repair and then continued fortifying the fence wherever it looked like the groundhogs might make incursions. We placed bricks and logs on top of the chicken wire to obstruct the gaps where the fence didn't quite meet the ground. We wound more chicken wire around the lily bed's decorative green fencing and we strung chicken wire across the deck, enclosing it. For a couple of nights, I put a colander held down with a brick over the radishes until we could enclose all those pots within a cage of chicken wire.

Each morning, before tea, we would inspect the perimeter, exclaim with both awe and anger over the groundhogs' persistence in finding new ways to get into the yard and each afternoon, we made more repairs. The groundhogs seemed however, to get bolder and I had the unpleasant sensation that they felt they were the true owners of the place and we were just intruders. One afternoon, I came down the hill to transplant some of the potted vegetables into large boxes in the yard when I startled a couple of groundhogs running. One ran off under the deck but the other seemed to get only as far as the nearby wheelbarrow which was filled with long weeds and grasses overhanging to the ground. Cautiously, I stepped nearer to the barrow, figuring it had run out the other side and I'd missed it. But no. There, sitting comfortably behind a curtain of grasses, the groundhog looked impudently back at me, a huge mouthful of weed and grass sticking out of the corner of its mouth. It glared at me, not chewing, and I glared back uncertain what to do next. If I'd had a trap, I would have tried encouraging the thing to get into it. But I didn't. Astonished at the groundhog's audacity, I started talking to it, scolding it for destroying the plants and warning it to tell its family and friends to stay away. Still not chewing the protruding greenery, it watched me closely, waiting for me to do the polite thing and go away. I got progressively more irritated at the standoff, worried that this might be one of the babies and an enraged mother might charge me, but frustrated at the damage these creatures were wreaking. I turned away to get a stick and came back, expecting it would escape in my absence. I looked under the wheelbarrow and there it still sat, suspicious brown eyes watching me, mouthful of grass still motionless, looking for all the world as if I were the intruder, preventing it from finishing its breakfast. I banged on the top of the wheelbarrow and shook the overhanging grasses but it stayed put until I moved off towards the house in

disgust. Then, finally, I saw it scuttle away towards its burrow.

Stubbornly, Tony and I got out the chicken wire again and wound more of it around the large boxes in the yard. The next door neighbour's kids, a young boy and girl swinging idly from a suspended tire in their yard, watched with interest. One of them volunteered "Have you seen the groundhogs?" The other added giggling "They were making out!" and they both tittered. Grimly, we continued making our fortifications, despite a sinking feeling in both our hearts.

Two or three mornings later, on my perimeter patrol, I startled three groundhogs, a mother with two much smaller babies than I'd seen before. They all ran towards the fence by their burrow, but one of the babies got confused and couldn't find the gap in the fence. I walked towards it, hoping it would lead me to the gap we'd missed, but instead of finding the gap, it poked its head through one of the links in the chain link fence and wriggled furiously, trying to force the rest of its body through. With horrified amazement I watched it struggle, uncertain how to encourage it to back out and try another path. Visions ran through my mind of whole families of groundhogs trapped in the fence, tails batting to and fro on one side, heads twisting to and fro on the other. Removing one length of fence with all the groundhogs so imprisoned would solve all my problems! But I really am not that heartless, and as I backed off, the groundhog baby succeeded in pushing its entire body through the fence and disappeared down the burrow.

And that, I think, is the crux of the problem. I do think the groundhog babies are cute and even the adults are pretty interesting. They're doing what groundhogs do, tunnel holes and eat vegetation. And in our backyard, there's an abundance of tall grass and inviting weeds, enough for lots of groundhogs and even a few goats, and even then we'd still have to mow more often than we like. I love watching wildlife doing what comes naturally. In fact, thinking about the thrill of seeing those first green radish shoots sprouting, I realize that I love watching life. And, remembering that tiny groundhog's frantic attempts to push through the fence because I was looming over it, some of the fight drains out of me. I must come to terms with the fact that I'd much rather watch all these wonderful living beings than bad-temperedly chase them, shouting and clapping my hands. It's a very uneasy truce, for I do want to have flowers around and a nice yard, and I would like to have a few vegetables that we grew ourselves. And just how many babies does a groundhog have?

As I sit writing this piece on the deck, beneath me, a groundhog sits up on its haunches, light brown forepaws holding a mass of leaves to its twitching mouth. Looking through the railing, I ask it half-heartedly if it please wouldn't mind going home to finish eating. It looks at me soberly, still chewing, turns to find another leaf or two and then moves off, vanishing into the thick brush but clearly taking the long way home. I can still hear rustling, although I can no longer see it.

I sigh again, and redirect my concept of these groundhog wars. I imagine child-

proofing or cat-proofing a home. We've already learned to take temptation out of the way. We know now to put pots of pansies up high, to mount window boxes on the deck railings and house window sills and not to leave them on the ground. We'll maintain the chicken wire fences around the raised boxes with vegetable plants in them and we'll happily pay for fresh vegetables and produce, now sympathizing more knowledgeably with skilled farmers. And really, if having these chubby, furry creatures around means I don't have to mow the lawn as often, I think I could learn to live with them.

It's early days, though, and the trapper's phone number is posted on the kitchen bulletin board.
