GARDENERS FOR A GEOLOGIC AFTERLIFE - GARDEN GUIDE

SITE ONE

FORESTS
MOSS
ECOSYSTEMS
LANGUAGES + FORMS OF COMMUNICATION
IVY
WOOL
OLD FORMS
HELLE-BORE
BIRCH
AGROFORESTRY
COMPOST
STINGING NETTLE
MINERALS
MOURNING + FUNERARY PRACTICES
LIGHT
TURNING SOIL
SOIL REMEDIATION

WORM CASTINGS
WITCH HAZEL
RABBIT
HÜGELKULTUR-MOUND/HILL CULTURE
SWEET PEPPER BUSH
WATER RECYCLED MOVING BLANKET TARP

SOIL BLOCKING
FORAGING
REGENERATIVE PRACTICES
BEANS
DYE FLOWERS
ONIONS
BLADDER WRACK
PEAS
COMPANION PLANTING
TRIAL + ERROR
CROP ROTATION
FOODWAYS
OAK LEAVES
PINE NEEDLES

EGGSHELL INCUBATION LAMPS
FUTURE MATERIALS
MILK THISTLE
THE BODY
GERMINATION MOUNDS
MEDICINAL + CULINARY HERBS
MOTHERWORT
ARNICA
BURDOCK
BEE BALM
CARAWAY
CHIVES
CALENDULA
EPAZOTE
FENUGREEK
FLAX
HYSSOP
MITSUBA
MRIHANI BASIL
PARSLEY
PENNYROYAL
ROSEMARY
SWEET ANNIE
THYME
VALERIAN
WORMWOOD
ZA'ATAR

STRUCTURES FOR WATER
ARTICHOKE
PROTECTIVE ENCLOSURES
BONESET
BORAGE
FRAGMENT
OWL
BLACK COHOSH
DAHLIA + ALLIUM
DOWSING STICKS + HAND TOOLS
POLLINATOR MOUNDS
SYSTEMS OF CARE

SITE TWO

The Gardener, 2023
Single-use containers, ash, plaster, gauze, and steel wire

SITE THREE

The World Without Word (Garden), 2024
Seed catalogs, plaster, and found objects

SITE FOUR

FARMERS
SHOVEL
ARTICHOKE
CARBON
TREES
ALLIUM
BEE HOTEL
GARDENS OF GRAND-MOTHERS
EDGES
CLOVER
ANCIENT THINGS
SUPPORT STRUCTURES

*This garden plan is not to scale. Plants + objects are subject to change.

Gardeners for a Geologic Afterlife
Erin Woodbrey

I am in the garden walking amongst the dead and living and the dead that have gone on living. They are living inside me, inside the soil, and inside stories, amongst mycelium, worms, and the worms eaten by birds. All the processes, beings, microbes, and biomes that exist between named states. I don't have words for them yet, but I can smell all of them–their springiness, wetness, and pith. It is fresh and old at the same time. The air is still and has a chill to it. Unless there is wind and then I can feel the freeze of the winter that still might be around. But the frost has mostly passed. When I get back inside, my hands are raw and tingling. I am happy to share in this coldness.

Back inside, a cool blue light glows above the shelving, bouncing back a warm green. The whole room smells like cinnamon, which I've read can kill whatever moss or algae seems to be forming alongside the seedlings. Starting at the end of January, I have been tending to the seeds, both the ones visibly sprouting and the ones for which I'm still waiting. I've wrapped some in dampened paper - mostly wildflowers, soil-remediating, and pollinator-supporting plants. I am holding them over for a cold period in the fridge.

Germination can be touch and go. Some seeds like dark, cold places, and some need periods of dryness, dampness, warmth, and sunlight. I am trying to group the seeds by their needs, but it's a lot to keep track of. I label each plant with their common and scientific name. I hope that through the repetition of writing each year, I will learn some new words. I add the date I planted them on the back of each label. CS is my shorthand for the cold stratification date when they entered the fridge. This year, I made a calendar counting back from the last frost date, what needs to be planted, and when. The date always seems to be coming sooner.

Meanwhile, in the studio, I am making a garden that reflects my garden outside and also a garden that has not been made yet. Maybe it is a garden from some time long ago? Or perhaps it is a composite of all the gardens I have seen, read about, or imagined—a mythological garden. I think about the experience of time as I make and all the stories my making contains. That's what I like about gardening: being part of different times and narratives all at once and being part of a careful-care-filled future.

I build a platform and start laying out rows. As I do outside each spring, I map out the space with labels and markers for each plant. I place tomato cages, trellises, and various supports, containers, and vessels for growing where the plants will eventually go. I run outside to gather pine needles and oak leaves for mulch and place them next to a pile of worm castings. I start to think that gleaning may be a way of seeing.

I grab a couple of armfuls of wood in preparation for preparing a Hügelkultur bed. *Mound/Hill Culture*. The bed will be made out of woody debris and layers of various materials. I love the idea of facilitating a place that, over time, will feed itself. The wood below will decay slowly. Above the leaves, plant waste, compost, bugs, and fungi will all warm up together and hold the moisture. As a nickname, I call the one I am making "Hügel-log." It is a small unit of gardening that is part of a something more extensive. I research what wood is best and learn about allelopathic plants and the poisonous compounds they emit. I make a watering can out of paper pulp. With clay, I form germination mounds loosely referencing a human breast enclosing milk thistle seeds that I hope will sprout. The earth is a body.

For a spell my studio becomes a production facility for developing bio-plastic. I gather bladderwrack at the beach, which is then washed and dried, and then make it into a slurry of water and starches that I heat. At the end, I add pulverized clam, mussel, and egg shells, along with paper pulp made of last year's gladiolas leaves. Above there are compostable lampshades made from egg shells, methylcellulose, and gauze. I imagine them here in their golden glow and also someday in a compost heap being eaten by worms and whoever else may be passing through. I think about all the touching that happens. All the materials I brush up against, absorb, and ingest. What are the materials that I encounter every day? What is meant to be returned somewhere? I always assume the somewhere is the ground or maybe the ocean. How can I ensure that the return will be safe and without loss or erasure?

I drained the peas from their 12-hour water bath. They are slightly slimy, and the water overnight has become cloudy. I assume they are shedding nutrients, so I use their water to water other plants. Nothing here is wasted, and everything seems to be in a state of consuming itself and each other. It is a careful exchange to ensure this whole thing keeps on going, keeps on living. I don't know what makes sense today, but I am holding these little, perfect, slippery peas in my hands.

As I do the garden, I walk around the platform, but there is no soil here to hold things in place. The same properties of gravity and matter apply, but inside is another world. If I move too hastily in here, things fall apart. I am surprised by the revelation that plants seem to be more forgiving than sculptures.

Each year, I try out one or two new vegetables. Last year, it was burdock root and mulukhiyah. The year before that, sea kale and skirret, and the one before that, salsify and parsley root. This year, I am growing orange Turkish eggplants and peppers to make paprika. I usually try each plant for a few years. Sometimes, it takes a lot of time to learn a plant and figure out what each one needs amidst the conditions of the specific year. Even in the most ideal of conditions, there are all the subtleties of harvesting, cooking, drying, and preserving. So many histories and foodways. I find something steadying about what carries over year to year and worry about what is becoming more scarce, what is lost year to year.

The year there was drought, the birds flocked to any water pooling on the ground. The earth had become so dry and dense that the water often barely permeated before the birds got to the water or the water evaporated into the air. During this period, everything struggled. I laid down salt marsh hay in an attempt to hold in the moisture. I watered by hand every morning and evening. I would turn over a clump of the hay and find the worms eating away. I found salamanders, mice, rabbits, and beetles, for which I don't know the names. At night, there was an owl that would hang out in the oak tree. The garden feels as though it is becoming a kind of beacon.

I open the fridge and take out a container of the seeds enclosed in packets of moistened paper. Each one is labeled with a name, start date, and the date when they need to be planted outside. I'm in my third year of trying with a lot of these plants. Half the pack of seeds I start outside in an experimental rewilding patch. The remainder, I subject to my replicated winter. The whole thing of a seed germinating is a precarious miracle. I open up some of the packets to take a look. Some have imprinted on the paper, their seed coats breaking down, and others are largely unchanged. These plants are slow to grow and often take years to be big enough to plant in the ground. Sometimes they don't come back. I think about all the bees underground waiting out these last cold days.

I am waiting for them and also for the last batch of pots to dry. I add twine to the trellis in preparation for the peas that are starting to grow out of test tubes containing layers of sand, rock, wool, and compost. The test tubes provide a hermetic home for a future plant. There is a hole or rather a stand-in for a hole in the ground, that is, the compost and the entry into the ground or maybe into an underworld.

As for the geologic afterlife, I am curious about what happens when we aren't here anymore and if there is another name for that. I think it would likely be a verb - something related to action, caring, exchange, and tending to. I wonder what gardening and the requisite tending, caregiving, and collaboration could offer as a model for navigating this life and for the lives that come next. I wonder what afterlives we are living in and think of rocks and all their density, opacity, and the stories held in the earth. What is an afterlife? I don't know. I think it is what happens after we are living and all the lives that keep on living after us and before us, too.

I start working on the hand tools. It will take a while to get them working again. Tools are things that make things, and they have utility, function, futility, and failure. I add water to wire cloches. There is material to the symbolic. In a nod to all the folkloric harbingers of spring, I make a rabbit out of used containers and an owl I place on a dowel I found. The owl serves a mythological and practical role, keeping away the other birds and maybe the rabbits, at least for a minute.

On the wall, there is a photograph of Stone Age hand tools. A spread of handles made primarily from wood. Whatever was affixed to the handles has been separated. Either it is gone or is languishing in a drawer somewhere or is underground still. I scan the image. It seems like each was selected for a specific bend in the wood. I wonder what this says about life and what materially happens to objects once they are buried and subjected to earth-life, earth-time.
Back with the seedlings, I make a list of everything planted so far and everything I have to do today, tomorrow, and so on. I get distracted by the comfrey that hasn't emerged yet and read about comfrey's mending of bones. I think about menopause and abortion bans and the black cohosh plants I haven't checked on this year. On a walk I see the foxglove starting to come up. There are the ones inside that I know will sprout soon. How did anyone ever discover chemicals from foxglove that could treat heart failure, fluid buildup in the body, and atrial fibrillation? The witch hazel arrived a few days ago. I'm not sure yet where they will go and read about bark being used to treat fever and the pollinators that will flock to their last-of-the-season blooms.

The ground is a kind of inside holding all the insides together. I watch the patch outside and see tulips sprouting out from the ground. Last year we extended the garden. I had planted tulips years ago as a border. I thought that with all the digging and moving the fence, we had dug them all up, but it seems quite a few were growing a lot deeper than expected. Maybe all the digging split the bulbs in a way that helped them grow? Or the wetness of this spring activated something dormant, some leftover fragment. Inside, plants are growing, but I can never fully supplement the sun, and I wonder even about the soil I have been making.

Earlier today, I found a note stuffed into my pocket. It read, "Nothing is new, and everything must be changed over time." I don't know where these words came from - if I read them somewhere or if it was something I made up. Maybe it was both. A kind of truism, advice, a rule to describe certain fixed elements of the universe. Some of the seedlings aren't doing so well. I've given them all a rotation, placing them in new spots so that maybe the ones that have been a little light-deprived can catch up and the ones that have had too much can take a break.

I think about the feeling of bodies. The feeling of my body. What is going on inside? What I eat everyday, the medicine I have to take, and the times I tried not to. The different supplements I had to boil or chew. All the things dispensed by droplet, tablet, and gelcap. I want to break them all down into all their parts to know where they come from. I want to know all the plants and their stories and the people and animal stories they trace. There are worlds sprouting out of these little trays.

With all these worlds growing, I am running out of soil. I go to the beach and collect another bucket of sand. I'm on the phone with my mom, who tells me that my grandmother, who was a farmer, used to bake her soil when she was using it to start seeds indoors. So I do the same. The kitchen smells like summer, and I warm my hands in the sand as it comes out of the oven. I bring the bucket upstairs and start mixing all the parts. I'm trying to use less plastic, so this year, I am trying out soil blocking using a press that makes perfect little cubes of soil with a divot in them to plant the seed. Today, it will be flowers.