

# Keeping Track

The benefits of keeping a garden journal



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**Question:** I seem to have trouble remembering gardening tips and details each year, such as that great tip for controlling powdery mildew or the name of the tomatoes my family loved last year or when was I supposed to fertilize the blueberries? How does a gardener keep track of it all?

**Answer:** Once upon a time, my trial-and-error gardening self, with decades of gardening seasons yawning ahead of me, didn't worry too much about these things.

There was always next year. Likely, I would come across that great tip again (or another one). There are oodles of varieties of tomatoes to explore and I could always move a peony after next spring's bloom revealed its color once again. And truth be told, my younger brain simply remembered more.

But as I mature in age and in my gardening practices, I have found myself wanting to be more efficient. As my garden swells with the addition of new plants, so too does my brain burgeon with seeds of new knowledge.

Each lovely encounter with a fellow gardener, each perusal of gardening websites, classes or books adds ideas that could work magic together – much like the ingredients of my compost pile – if only I could remember them all.

Over the past couple of gardening seasons, I found an answer: keeping a garden journal.

For years I plowed through each season on whim and chance. And then I caught myself creating extra work when



PHOTO BY JULIE BURCHSTEAD

Garden journals, like this handmade book, helps to capture and reinforce learning, provides a place to plan, document and collect resources as well as track progress.

I omitted important planning details. Or worse yet, repeated mistakes leading to less than hoped for results.

Keeping a garden journal helps me steer my practices more often toward success.

There are as many ways to keep track as there are gardeners. As a book maker, I love the aesthetics of a free-flowing, handmade journal approach, with a bullet journal type table of contents to help me find things (for those not familiar with bullet journals, there

are easy to find tutorials on YouTube).

But a fellow gardener I know does her planning on precise and brilliantly organized digital spreadsheets adorned with colorful photos. For those looking for something simpler, there are a wide variety of blank journals available at stores that carry office supplies.

Even a garden variety spiral notebook will do.

The longer I keep a garden journal, the more I appreciate the practice. It is a source of

detail and reflection, a record of failures and success. This past spring I planted a Three Sisters Garden, a spring during which we experienced not one, but two late frosts.

I planted my corn far too early, and though many of my tiny starts survived, all developed the early tasseling and poor production typical of corn exposed to cold temperatures.

I won't make that mistake again. But my journal also documents my successes such as a breathtaking bloom of Clarkia

amoena. The prior winter I had taken notes from OSU studies on native bees and wildflowers. I had carefully chosen this flower and sketched out where it would likely thrive in my yard. I noted where I obtained the seeds and when and how I started them.

Because of my notes, I will have a better chance of replicating that spectacular success next year.

Garden journals capture and reinforce our learning. They provide a handy place to plan, document and collect resources. But perhaps best of all, they help us track and celebrate our progress.

It is easy to forget all the hard work and steps of prior seasons when our hearts are focused on the vision of what we want our garden to someday be. My vision is to create an urban oasis for pollinators from a yard of mostly lawn.

Year after year, one small, hand-dug bed at a time, grass has slowly given way to more plants and flowers. This past August, a white-lined sphinx moth hung out in my garden. How satisfying to see and document that small first indicator of my vision coming true.

Revisiting that moment, in-between planning optimum locations for new plantings and noting when to start each tray of seeds in my tiny greenhouse, will brighten this winter's dark days and get me off to a great start this spring! Gardens are one of our best expressions of hope.

"There are dozens of decisions to make at the outset of a new garden. Keeping even a few notes can help you stay on course when you are tempted to forego planning and preparation. Be patient. Learn from your mistakes. Take time and stop and smell the flowers." – Rodale's Basic Organic Gardening (2014)

*Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu) or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*