

Teaching as Gardening

It's summer, and it's the holidays. Any teacher who denies that this perk of our job is indeed a mighty blessing is lying. After arising at a modest hour of the day, I emerge from our kitchen to spend time in our garden. Living in a mid-terrace house in Norwich as we do, this is thin, but surprisingly long. It divides into two paved areas separated by a handkerchief of lawn, with long beds either side. If I count the plants, we have perhaps twenty-five major shrubs; which reminds me of a classroom of twenty-five students. Is this too much of a cliché? Indulge me, as I reflect on the varied parallels between gardening and teaching.

Plants are different, and students are different. Some plants survive whatever; you are guaranteed a healthy crop of flowers even if you ignore them completely. I can think of many robust ex-students who would have achieved great things had I given them a textbook and nothing else. Other living creatures are more sensitive, requiring prolonged attention and tenderness. Can we find a more productive place for this plant in this garden? (Have you got your seating plan right?) Would full sun (sitting at the front table) or partial shade (towards the back of the class on the left) be beneficial? I find it a joy to dig up and move a struggling plant and watch it recover (this is akin to retaining a student who initially says he wants to leave, but who in the end is glad he's stayed the course).

Not every plant flowers at the same time of year (and thank goodness for that). That is also true of students' careers. Some underachieve at GCSE, for any of a

multitude of reasons, then flourish at A Level – others peak at GCSE and find A Level harder. Others achieve moderately at A Level, but then choose to further their studies at the right university, and a PhD can follow.

A garden can be taken over by pests, as a classroom can be invaded, for example, by a sense of ennui. Are you as a teacher or gardener going to react in an organic way (point out the problem to the class in a calm and restorative fashion), or are you going to give them a blast of chemicals (read the riot act)?

A garden sleeps over winter, before growing to a great display of energy and activity in the summer months - likewise, the classroom is dormant over the summer holidays, but crescendos to a cacophony of effort and striving come the exams. Maybe we DO sometimes try to get our plants to all flower together (it is easy to misspell 'gardener' as 'gradener'.)

But there are differences between gardens and classrooms. We choose our plants, at least the new ones, but not our students. Students move on, hopefully without dying, while plants usually don't. We can put our plants into pots, and then, like students, they can be regrouped time and time again - but plants that have taken root in full soil can't be repositioned quite so easily.

I see gardening as essentially a simple activity. Plants need water, feeding, pruning, the right amount of sunlight, the right soil and a certain amount of pest control.

(When do we need to prune a student? Might they be the one who has their hand up

first for every question? The sunlight needs to be shared.) It seems to me that if I get these basics right, 95% of plants will flourish. That remaining 5% includes the saddest plants in my garden – the ones that leaf but never flower. I have a peony that looked beautiful in bloom for the first year, but has never flowered since, despite producing lots of succulent leaves. I need some advice on this one – time for *Gardeners' Question Time* (or the TES forum).

One last thing – any largish garden is likely to have a compost heap. I remember reading these wise words by a monk I once knew – ‘our failures become the compost from which our successes grow.’

Jonny Griffiths, jonny.griffiths@ntlworld.com Feb 2012