

# Oh, the Humility (of gardening)

**BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES**, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

As gardeners, we make decisions every day about what stays, what goes and what will take its place. Being faced with constant predicaments means we're bound to get it wrong some of the time; in fact, the longer someone's been at it, the more embarrassing notches go on the belt. A garden is a living rather than static thing and never entirely within our control. For gardeners, this unsettling process of working toward one result and having something altogether different happen in the meantime ultimately moves us from novice toward master. It requires constant flexibility; there are no masters on this road, just humbler gardeners. Long-time Nebraska landscape architect Steven Rodie says plants regularly "make a liar out of him." So too do they defy and befuddle the rest of us.

There must be something we enjoy about the garden as an unbounded source of the unexpected, or else we would have gotten out of the game a long time ago. All that excitement certainly keeps us at NSA on our toes—even with over 40 years of collective wisdom wafting through the halls, our staff admit that we get stumped regularly. As proof, here's a selection of planting puzzles inspired by gardening-gone-wrong stories we've endured just recently. Follow along to decide how you would handle each situation, and whether it aligns with what we ended up doing.

1. **VOLUNTEER VINES**—You're establishing a living mulch garden between the house and sidewalk, and it's filling in nicely except for the three-foot strip underneath the eave. Then two vines—Virginia creeper and winter creeper (photo above)—show up at the back stoop. The former is already headed up your (rather ugly) siding and the latter is spreading throughout your bluestar. You concede that they're a living mulch of sorts, so do you leave them be?

2. **A MAJOR LOSS**—Last September, you watered in two dozen plugs of dotted *Liatris* planted in the "perfect spot" (full sun, excellent drainage), but only two come up the following spring. All that money down the drain, what happened?! Do you dare give them a second try?

3. **SEEDY SUSAN**—You sowed some black-eyed Susan in a new prairie garden for quick color and two years later it's everywhere. Oops. It hasn't choked anything out, but is casting shade on the slow-growers. Do you reign it in and, if so, how?

## What Happened Next

**VOLUNTEER VINES**—Even though it may have worked as living mulch, Rachel ripped out the winter creeper as completely as she could, worried about its reputation for invading native woods. As for the Virginia creeper, she let it be in the hopes that it will cover up her dull siding and the bare spot under the eave. We'll see if its spread will eventually make her regret this decision, but she's hoping the bluestar can hold its own.

**A MAJOR LOSS**—Bob guesses that voles or moles ate up all the young gayfeather corms, and that they'll do the same thing again if given the chance. But feeling it would be such a nice spot for *Liatris*, he wasn't going to give up yet. Instead, he decided to sow a few hundred seeds over the next couple winters, with the idea that when they all germinate in spring, there will be too many for the voles to keep up with and a few will skate by to maturity.

**SEEDY SUSAN**—Rachel first tried to beat back the Susans via thorough deadheading to keep new seed from setting. Then she mulched for good measure. But when those yellow flowers came up gangbusters again after two years of this routine, she ripped them out by the roots in a fit of frustration. Rachel figures this act of soil disturbance left the garden even more vulnerable to germination, and now she's worried she'll be battling black-eyed's for the rest of her life.

Garden designer Vita Sackville-West confessed "I have had to eat my words so often, they are getting to be almost palatable." Sooner or later, spouting forth plant knowledge always seems to end with having to eat our words. If you need humility, we recommend taking up gardening. And if you want to confess your gardening mistakes in public, you can post them in comments on the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum's Facebook page and we will commiserate and learn together.

*Rachel Anderson, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, [plantnebraska.org](http://plantnebraska.org)*

