

Messy Neighbourhood

By Preston Pouteaux

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Elbow deep in new soil, and tending to bad sun-burns, I'm surprised that gardening has become one of our favourite activities. My wife and I love to root around, pull up weeds, move the sprinkler here and there, and add nutrients to our new little plants. Often we're enthusiastically calling out across the yard to each other, "hun, there's a baby shoot over here, have you seen it? Come look!" Or, "hey, did you know this thing makes flowers?" Most of the time we're surprised that anything is growing with our newbie gardening skills.

Science has offered even more reasons for getting dirty in the garden. Researchers have found that a microbe found in dirt called *Mycobacterium vaccae* actually functions as an anti-depressant by releasing serotonin in the brain. Digging in the garden stirs up the microbe and we respond in surprising ways. The dirtier you get, the better you feel.

Gardeners understand the importance of getting messy. They know that for things to grow, you can't just use dirt, you must create soil with good ingredients. Compost and manure are used to amend soil, essential for a healthy garden. Gardeners recognize that each plant grows in a unique way and we cannot manufacture growth, we can only create a healthy environment for plants to flourish. We know that the tastiest strawberries are not always the biggest or prettiest and each plant produces its own special fruit or flower in its own time. Gardeners know that to care for a garden you have to get down and into it, you can't stand above it. Gardens are messy, and that's never a problem.

We know that neighbourhoods, like gardens, are messy. But for those of us who know the joy and life that comes from a healthy neighbourhood, messiness is not a problem. We know that bad things can be used for good and can produce life again. We work together to create good soil and a rich environment for neighbours to thrive. Each neighbourhood will grow in their own unique way, and even the smallest flower is something to celebrate. As we get down into the neighbourhood by knowing our neighbours and caring for each other, we may even catch ourselves happily calling out to each other, celebrating signs of new growth and life. To enjoy a garden you have to be present; smelling the fresh buds, hearing the buzzing bees, and crunching into a fresh snap pea. It's in the mess, in the soil and growth of our communities, that we find life.

Consider going for a walk through your neighbourhood and think of your community as a garden that requires care for it to grow. Watch and listen for signs of life and for signs of stagnation. Creating an environment of grace and life where people can flourish might do as much for you as anyone in your community. Because as gardeners know, the dirtier you get, the better you feel.

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