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Hadley Presents

Gardening

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, we discuss gardening, no matter your level of vision, and our guests are Hadley's Chief Program Officer, Ed Haines, along with master gardener Sue Brasel. Welcome to the show.

Sue Brasel: Thank you.

Ed Haines: Yeah. Thanks, Ricky. This is going to be fun.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, I agree. I mean, it's springtime as we're recording this and you just step outside and everything starts to smell so green and wonderful, so I figured, what better time to talk about gardening and growing things? I'm so happy that both of you are here. Before we get into actually talking about gardening, why don't we just do a couple of quick introductions? Ed, you are Hadley's Chief Program Officer and you've been on a number of these before, but you also enjoy gardening.

Ed Haines: Yeah, I sure do, Ricky. Yeah, I'm currently the Chief Program Officer, but for many years at Hadley, I had the pleasure of teaching a gardening course. Gardening is just a wonderful activity. I'm a gardener myself. My mother was a gardener, my grandmother was a gardener, getting enjoyment out of growing things goes way back in my family, and it's so much fun to pass that on to other folks.

Ricky Enger: That's awesome. Sue, I know that at least some people will be familiar with your voice if they have participated in a few of our Hadley discussion groups. You are certainly a great participant and have lots of knowledge to share in our gardening group among other things. Why don't you just tell us a bit about yourself?

Sue Brasel: I've been blind for about a decade now. When it happened to me, what I wanted to do was find something that I could do. I didn't like all the things that I couldn't do, so I thought, "I can do my hobbies. I can do, among them, gardening." That has continued. I go outside and I work with my plants. I have plants in the ground, and I have container gardens and I also have houseplants.

Ricky Enger: So, you have pretty much done the gamut of all of these types of gardening. I'm just now getting started with indoor gardening, and I'm really excited about that, but I know that there's so much more, there's going outside, having fun with plants, there's growing things on your windowsill, there's hydroponic gardening, which is what I'm dipping my toe into now. So many different ways to do this. I love that we're here to just talk about some of those things and what you might want to think about if you're losing your vision or have lost vision and maybe you were gardening before and now, you're concerned about, "Oh, no, how am I going to do that?" Or maybe you're just looking for a hobby and this is a great one.

Let's jump in then to talking about gardening. There's one thing I was wondering about with you, Sue, which is, you alluded to the fact that gardening was always a hobby for you, and you started to lose your vision and you wanted to make sure that you could still do that. What were you thinking as your vision loss was happening? Were there particular things that you thought were going to be problematic with continuing to garden?

Sue Brasel: One of the biggest problems that I still have is telling the difference between the weeds and the plants that I really want to grow. Then the other half of that is I have weeds that are growing among my plants, like in my rosemary bush, I have poison ivy. I want to be very careful when I go into the rosemary because it is still edible as long as I wash it and I try to keep that poison ivy away. The thing is, if you are allergic to poison ivy, you might be better off not even trying to eat the plants that are growing right beside it, right among it. You'd rather be safe than sorry.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, so those are some interesting things to think about, just how do you tell what is the thing that I want and what is the thing that I very much do not want? I suspect that happens not only with the kinds of plants or weeds, but also maybe pests, what's getting at my garden, what's chewing up things that I don't want, and also, what things might actually be beneficial for the plant, so interesting to think about that. Ed, what about you? Do you have things that people tend to struggle with initially and even how do we work around those things?

Ed Haines: Sure, Ricky. Sue's exactly right, weeding is always a primary concern for folks who have lost a bit of vision, they still want to garden. There's no one right solution to that problem, but I do want to say that gardening, really contrary to maybe to our stereotypes of the activity, is primarily, it's a tactile activity, it's something you do with your hands, use your sense of touch. So as you garden and as you become a seasoned gardener, and I'm sure Sue knows this, you sort of become familiar with the different weeds that grow in your garden and what they feel like and you know the difference just by touch between those and between, say, the poison ivy and the rosemary, but there are some other things you can do to try to just mitigate the growth of weeds.

The first thing is I always recommend containers and raised beds because at least you're controlling the perimeter of your growing medium so that you don't have weeds encroaching from the outside, so you know at least what's within the bounds of that container or raised bed, you sort of have an idea of what it's going to be. Also, use good quality potting mix or potting soil because that generally has less weed seeds in it if you're using containers.

Then I always tell everybody, mulch, mulch, mulch. You can mulch in containers, you can mulch in open beds, raised beds. There's lots of different mulch materials out there. But I hate to weed. It doesn't matter what level of vision you have. Everyone hates to weed, for the most part. Some people find it therapeutic, but generally, it's a chore, so if you mulch, you're eliminating a lot of the weed growth already, and you have a limited area where you have to worry about.

Ricky Enger: Sue, as you were thinking about gardening, were there things that as you're losing your vision and you're like, "Okay, I got to figure out how I'm going to get rid of the weeds or tell what's growing and not touch the bad things and keep the good things going," were there things that you thought were going to be really straightforward and that actually did turn out to be an unexpected challenge?

Sue Brasel: I think that growing anything is a challenge just because when the sun shines, you can't always tell, is it going to hit my plants for the right amount of time, for the right amount of wind affecting your plant? Those kinds of things will always be a challenge, but when you're looking at planting and realizing that not everything will grow the way you want it to, then as long as you can accept that, then you're doing fine.

Ricky Enger: That's actually a really good point is just to let go of having complete control over things, and so having this vision for what things are going to be, and then it turns out, "Well, not exactly," but you have this instead. Yeah, that's a really good point. Do you have thoughts about figuring out where the shade is, and where the sun is, and so thinking about how to plant things, to take advantage of those things, like knowing where the shade is in your garden and such?

Sue Brasel: It's always a challenge to figure out where the sun will shine the most because year to year, your trees grow, so they will cover a larger portion that used to be in the sun. That aside, you know or can figure out which part of your area is facing the north. That is going to typically be the most shade. If you look at it for the evening sun, when that sun comes and hits your plants in the afternoon, that's very, very hot for those struggling plants, so you keep that in mind. You may have to set up little trellis and cover them so that they provide, that trellis will provide some shade for your plants. Once you realize that, then you'll be a lot more successful.

Now, one of the things that I really like about a trellis is if you take a shower hook, the kind that you put in your bathtub, or over your bathtub, those are things that you can feel. If you can attach whatever kind of shade cloth you want to use for protecting your plants, attach that with a shower hook, you can always feel that shower hook. It's just like feeling your plant. You know where it is so that you can rearrange it if need be.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. All of that makes a lot of sense. Ed, do you have anything to add?

Ed Haines: Beginning gardeners, and I'll totally agree with what Sue says, they make the mistake of assuming that everything's going to grow the way they plan it to grow. We are partnering with Mother Nature here when we garden, so we don't have complete control over all the variables that are going to occur, especially if we're not lucky enough to have a greenhouse, for instance. I find that a lot of beginning gardeners, sometimes they're surprised by having too much success. By that, I mean that they don't plan for the amount of space they're actually going to need when those plants get big. You go to the gardening center, the plants are fairly small, they look wonderful, and you're full of hope and expectation. A lot of times we tend to, I still do this as a gardener, I buy too many seeds, I buy too many plants, and I never have enough room to put them all in, and when they mature, I'm always pulling things out because I'm overgrown and they're not thriving because they don't get enough space or air, et cetera. I think beginning gardeners are often surprised by their success.

Ricky Enger: I think an interesting thing to consider, how big is this thing going to be? You may believe that, okay, yeah, it's going to be this tall, but you haven't accounted for just how bushy it gets as well, and so I figure that some of that probably just comes with experience. You will have a few imperfections before you get it exactly right.

When I talked to my friends who are gardeners and they're planning what they're going to do, they're always like, "Oh, I'm going to plant these yellow flowers and it's really going to make things pop next to this green herb," or what have you. A lot of times, they're talking so much about the visual aspects of gardening. When you are thinking about planting your garden, Sue, I imagine that there's a lot more that goes into it other than just, how is this going to look when it grows? What kinds of things do you consider as you're figuring out what you're going to plant and where you're going to plant it?

Sue Brasel: A few of the things that I like to consider are the height of the plant. When it is mature, you don't want those nice tall plants to be blocking the tiny little plants, so you want to put the tall ones either in the center, if it's a walk-around kind of garden, or toward the back of the garden so that the smaller ones get their day in the sun and shine like that.

The other thing is because a lot of us are touching and feeling our plants, we like to let the oils of the plants come out, and so as you're rubbing the rosemary, you smell that on your hands, if you have lemon verbena, you're going to smell the lemon. So many plants have wonderful smells. I really enjoy the nice-smelling garden.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, it sounds like that certainly adds to the appeal, not just how it looks, but what is this going to taste like when I use it, and what does it smell like as I'm walking through or touching it? Ed, do you have anything that you would add to that?

Ed Haines: Sure. Sue alluded to this before. Sometimes you just need to plant for your specific growing conditions you need. Your plants have to be compatible with the amount of sun and shade you have, your distance from water source, just their adaptability to your environment, and what kind of space you've got.

Then a visual component of a garden is nice, that's great, and flower gardens can be lovely, but there's so much more to plants than just the flowers. For instance, a lot of people garden just using foliage and the different types of foliage as a visual feature, but then actually, that becomes a really wonderful tactile feature. Then as Sue alluded to, there's all sorts of scented plants, all sorts, a lot of them very easy to grow, that just give you another dimension to your garden.

Then people garden for utility, so some folks just want to garden to grow food, and some people want to grow herbs, and then a lot of folks just plant flowers or plants that attract birds or butterflies because that's what they enjoy.

Sue Brasel: To go along with what Ed just said, one of the most interesting ways of planting is to keep in mind the things that grow native to your area. Those are the ones that time has tested, and because of that plant in that location, then you have this crop of insects. The beneficial insects will outnumber the non-beneficial ones, the area of the butterflies or the other aspects that make a garden a total picture rather than just a plant.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, that's a good point. You don't just have plants, it's a part of a bigger system. You have birds, you have bugs, you have the kind of soil that you're planting in. As I'm talking about this, I'm thinking, "Wow, there are people who are listening to this and they've never gardened before and they're like, 'Oh, no, this is way too much to think about. I feel like I would need to take several classes or read several books before I would even start to do this,'" but I know that you got to start somewhere. Do you have thoughts about how can a beginner gardener get started with the most likelihood of success? We'll start with you, Sue.

Sue Brasel: One of the things that I think is most important is get a container, just one container to start, and fill it with potting soil. Not the soil from the ground. Because like Ed had mentioned before, it will have the weed seeds, and it may have different things that you don't want. The potting soil is a real good mixture for beginning plants. Put the plants that you really like in there. Depending on how big this container that you find is, you may have just one plant. You may have several plants. If you're talking of a two-foot-around container, you can have many plants. But just keep in mind that these plants will grow, and when they start growing, you may be overwhelmed at, "Oh, am I going to run out of space?" Keep that in mind and just enjoy whatever success you have.

The other thing is, if you have no success, if you forget to water your plants, if you don't check on them and they are overwhelmed with insect destruction, you can always paint a rock green, one that is preferably shaped long and skinny, like a finger, put it in some soil, and say, "At least I have a green thumb."

Ricky Enger: [laughs] Ed, I'm actually happy to say that when you mentioned "container gardening," I was sitting here clapping my hands going, "Hadley has workshops on that," so we can point right to a set of workshops that talk about just how to do container gardening. What excellent advice for the beginner. I appreciate that. Ed, do you have anything you would add to that?

Ed Haines: I would say right off the bat, if you're interested in gardening, find a gardener that's in your neighborhood because there may be reclusive gardeners out there that don't want to talk about what they're doing, but in general, gardeners love to brag about their own gardens and they love to show off their gardens, and most important, they love to share with new gardeners what works in their environment, what's worked for them, what plants are hardy in their particular neighborhood, and even better, most gardeners are eager to share plants, and so it's a great source of getting free advice and free plants. Gardening can be a community. It has a community aspect to it as well as a solitary activity, so don't miss out on the community of gardening.

Also, Sue mentioned: this be prepared for failure. It's kind of a war of attrition out there in the natural world. Some things are just not going to do well. That's okay. Doesn't mean you need to get discouraged. I have things every year that fail, but I have things that succeed when I don't expect it. That's just the nature of the beast.

Then start with easy stuff. I've noticed folks are pretty ambitious right at the start and they want to grow things like roses or corn or maybe some pretty intense tomatoes. Start with stuff that's easy. There's lots of flowering plants that you can grow that are very hearty and insect resistant. They'll tolerate all sorts of abuse. Culinary herbs are great for that.

Then finally, I would just say if you're going to try gardening, try at least to grow a few things from seed because there's nothing more satisfying than putting a seed in the ground and eventually enjoying a fully grown plant, just nothing equals it. That's the advice I'd give

Sue Brasel: To add to what Ed said, start with seeds. Go ahead and put your seeds in water. What I do is I make sprouts. You don't want those to come to maturity. If you're growing sprouts, you're hoping for a harvest within a week. There is a lot of instruction online that you can go to find out how to grow sprouts particularly. I have a lot of fun growing sprouts because they're edible and you can use sprouting seeds. You can use seeds from the grocery store, such as dried peas and beans.

Ricky Enger: That's awesome. It actually does help, if you are somewhat impatient and you want to see success right away, that sounds like a nice way to do it. If you're doing sprouts and they do so quickly, maybe just having that success will get you more excited than to try even more things. I know that has certainly been true for me. I've just started a very tiny hydroponic garden and now that things are sprouting and growing, I wasn't sure what to expect, I thought that I had very much a brown thumb, and now that's happening, I'm very much curious to do more.

Thank you both for sharing all of this great advice, a few tips and tricks that you have. Is there one thing that each of you would leave the audience with that we really didn't touch on just yet, but that you think is essential that people walk away with when it comes to gardening?

Ed Haines: I would just say try it. Try it. Just one small pot, or as Sue said, try growing sprouts, just one small thing. You'll find the rewards just greatly outweigh any effort you'll put into the project.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. Thank you. Sue, how about you?

Sue Brasel: I like what Ed said. He said "community." If you find a mentor who will help you, not only do you get their knowledge, but you get companionship. One of the wonderful things about that is you have the plants that someone gave you that will regrow and regrow and regrow. I've got plants in my yard that have been given to me from people who are no longer alive and I'm so thankful I had them as friends.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, what a nice memory, a living memory to take with you of people. I just love the community aspect. Speaking of which, if you are interested in talking more about gardening, whether it's sharing what you're doing now, or maybe you're a beginner gardener, and you want to come in and ask some questions from people who have done this for a little while, we do have a gardening group, Hadley Growers, and we'll have information about that in our show notes. We hope you'll join us. Thank you, Ed, and thank you, Sue, for dropping by and just sharing your gardening knowledge. It's wonderful.

Sue Brasel: Thank you.

Ed Haines: Thanks, Ricky. It was great to be here.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future or episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu, that's P-O-D-C-A-S-T @ Hadley dot E-D-U, or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.