

Scan

Cultivate your career like a garden

friend, in planning his garden, looks 20 years down the road, taking into account sight lines and the relative growth patterns of different trees and shrubs.

Other people, in planting a garden, at best think only a few months ahead, and then only about one or two variables such as tall versus short, or sun versus shade. A garden for them is anything that grows and has colour.

Gardening, with its characteristics of growth, planning, and change, is in many ways an apt metaphor for work — and one that can provide some helpful hints for cultivating a successful career.

How does your garden grow?

If a plant is happy, it will grow. There is no such thing as a "bad" plant — it's a question of whether it is a good fit in its current environment. And just as you cannot change the nature of a plant, you should not try to change your underlying core personality. Don't try to become something you're not. Instead, look for environments that welcome your style. The new work world is actually very elastic and provides diverse environments — whether you want unstructured and hip or more traditional and predictable work settings.

Know what you have and want to work with.

As a gardener needs to understand considerations such as qual-



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ity of the soil and amount of sun, in thinking about your career you need to identify your core skills and values. These factors will drive your work satisfaction, the career decisions you make, and where and how you want to sell your skills. This requires rigorous self-assessment.

Landscape for the future.

Like planning a garden, effective career management requires long-term thinking. Understand the future work landscape and envisage yourself in that landscape. Ask yourself: What moves should I make now and what will increase my long-term options? How do I see myself living and working in the future? Do I need to make short-term sacrifices in favour of long-term choices? What is the cost, to me and to others, of those sacrifices?

Be attuned to the seasons.

There is a time when your garden blooms with colour and you are so

engaged by what you see that it's almost breathtaking. This is a time everything has come together. There are also times when it all seems to fall apart: it's not how you wanted it, how you saw it.

Careers go through cycles, too, to which you need to be attuned. Linda, 40, for example, says, "About every two years I feel like I come up against a wall and I have to go back and revisit what I'm doing." People seem to have a natural cycle — whether it's every two years or five years — in which their career satisfaction peaks and then crashes.

In the spring you are full of anticipation about your garden. People start new projects and jobs with the same excitement. But as you go through the weathering experience, work can enter a dark period. It is when your career is dormant much like when your garden has entered its down period, that you have to plan and determine the next steps.

Become a guerrilla gardener.

Know when it's not working — be vigilant in thinking about your work and be prepared to make moves to correct the situation. Don't allow yourself to languish. The price you pay is too great. Take calculated risks before you make a move, but don't allow yourself to become poisoned by bad work.

Weed aggressively.

Get rid of or minimize things that are not pleasing. Identify whether you need to change your entire

work situation or whether it's just one or two things that have disproportionately taken over how you feel about work. Typically, it is the latter, and with ruthless self-assessment you can identify the source of stress and, with some creative thought, minimize it.

Don't "die in the vine."

Too many people "die on the vine" from boredom and wondering how things might be different if only they had the nerve to make a change. Experiment with new things. Be bold. Often, a small shift in how or where you do something can provide a source of renewal.

Know when to transplant.

Sometimes a plant just doesn't work in a particular spot and needs to be transplanted. It may have been in the wrong place to begin with or circumstances may have changed. (A tree grew too tall, for example, creating a new, shadier habitat.)

In the same way, you have to be ready to move on when necessary. Sometimes you've erred and need to cut your losses. Other times your life has evolved in such a way that what used to work for you no longer does: your values or your life situation or the work itself has changed. Too often people hang on because of fear of change, or because they don't recognize that their current work is no longer a good match. Stay attuned to your environment, and you'll know when it's time to go.



Learn from your experience.

Psychologists define learning as the capacity to benefit from experience. Gardeners are always studying what works and fails, and more importantly, why.

In our incredibly busy lives we have lost what is perhaps the most important skill of all: reflection. Identify the circumstances under which you are successful and those under which you have failed. What can you extract from these experiences in terms of underlying principles which drive your overall effectiveness?

Design a changing composition.

Embrace change. Take advantage of unexpected occurrences. Don't try to micromanage your environment. Allow yourself opportunities for growth and discovery. Think of your work as an evolving landscape.

Be prepared to live with less than perfect.

A garden evolves over time. There will always be weeds, things over which you have no control. There is no perfect garden, and there is no perfect career. Be ready for that.

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