

Gardening Partners

by Adam Levine

TOM BORKOWSKI, MY PARTNER IN LIFE, is also my partner in the garden. Since 2004, when we bought our house on 1/8 acre in Media, Pennsylvania, we have been trying to work out what we want to grow on this 60' x 100' lot, and how we want the garden to look. Gardening with one other person makes an awkward kind of democracy—in any disagreement, the vote is always going to be a tie. Some gardening partners solve this dilemma by dividing the garden into separate beds in which each person can dictate, but Tom and I have tried to garden all of our small space together.

Tom grew his first petunia from seed when he was five, has gardened all his life, and has owned his own garden design-build firm for the past 21 years. I came to gardening late in life, after college, first as a way to make money, and only falling in love with it slowly. I learned much of what I know from Tom, which clearly makes him our garden's alpha dog; or to describe our relationship in political terms, we are a two-party government and he is the party in power. For a long time, I fought him purely as a lame way to bolster my feelings of inferiority: if I couldn't do what I wanted (more often it was the case that I couldn't even figure out what I wanted to do), then neither was I going to make it easy for him to accomplish anything he wanted. Now I see that being the Party of No goes nowhere quickly. Moving forward is impossible, and in a garden, when nothing gets done, beauty quickly succumbs to the weeds. Over time I have learned that the less I fight Tom's ideas, and the more I participate in the planning and planting, the more

successful the garden becomes—with the added benefit that both of us can take credit for the results.

Like our national democracy, gardening with a partner can follow a messy path sometimes, certainly not as straightforward as solo gardeners (dictators?) who can plant anything they want, anywhere they want. Of course, lone gardeners may also agonize over the particular placement of a plant, and move things around multiple times as they sort out their designs—but they never have to worry about the threat of a veto. For a long time, I envied the freedom of such gardeners, and resented the compromises I felt I had to make every time Tom and I planted anything. But I have lately (some might say belatedly, as we have been gardening together for nearly 15 years) come to appreciate the benefits of gardening with a partner, and of our particular partnership.

Tom has a great eye for color and design; I readily give him credit for the garden's plant combinations, and the layout of beds that makes the property seem much larger than it is. Creating privacy has been his special design challenge, and through various means—building a sunken patio beneath a long stone wall, planting trees and shrubs in strategic locations, and installing a long fence in the backyard and several shorter fence sections in front—he managed to block out many of the

thirteen properties that have a view into our garden.

Tom takes the old truism “A good garden is never finished” as his absolute creed, and herein lies his weakness: in constantly scanning the big picture while thinking of ways to improve it, he tends not to see most of the weeds. Fortunately, his weakness is my strength, since my garden eye (reflecting my general pessimistic view of the world)



This trellis is made of pieces from a fire escape railing we scavenged from a house that was torn down nearby. Some years we grow vines on it, this year we are leaving it empty to appreciate its sculptural nature.

A second pair of railing pieces, attached to the back of our garage, serves as a trellis for cross vine (*Bignonia capreolata*), a vigorous native climber that has glossy dark green evergreen foliage and orange flowers in the spring.

is focused on neatness, and never fails to find even the smallest imperfections. I used to resent Tom's more creative eye, his artistry—it often seemed as if he was a painter in a studio, and I was the janitor who cleaned up after him—but every garden needs its maintenance man, something Tom is the first to admit. As an extension of this, I am also a horticultural demolition expert, and the first year in this new garden I was in my glory. Along with 160' of unwanted privet hedge, I filled a Dumpster™ with the remains of several old azaleas and spiraeas and tons of debris from a concrete sidewalk that hugged one side of the house. I also spent a joyful afternoon deconstructing a green steel shed that stood in one corner of the backyard, until all that was left was a pint jar of small screws and a stack of metal sheets. I still have the screws, as a souvenir of that day, and a passing scavenger made both of us happy by taking the steel to sell for scrap.

Besides bringing complementary skills and passions to a garden, one partner can also help rein in the excesses of another. For us, this means that Tom has forced me to focus my mania for propagation on growing plants that we may actually use. This sounds sensible, I know, but I didn't always see it that way. Early on, I grew anything that caught my fancy, and often those seedlings languished in their pots for months as Tom and I wrangled over where to put them. "What does it look like? What does it do?" he'd ask me, and I'd respond, "I'm not sure, but it must be a good plant, or else it wouldn't be on the Hardy Plant Society seed list!" By August, I would be so angry that I wanted to throw all the unplanted pots right into the trash, and one sad year, I did. After that I took a few years off from growing plants from seed; now Tom and I consult the seed lists and catalogs together, which gives him some input into my sometimes capricious decision making and also some responsibility for finding a place in his plans for my babies.

While each of us has sometimes wielded our veto power over the other's

ideas, we more often try to reach consensus when we disagree, a process that can sometimes continue for days and weeks. Since ours is a small garden, any tree or shrub has to be chosen carefully, and these decisions have proved to be particularly difficult. We consult books and catalogs and web sites in our search for the perfect plant for each location and pump any gardening friends who might innocently drop in during the process for their ideas and solutions.

Once we make up our minds, we are just as likely to change them. For an evergreen screen between our backyard and the neighbor's driveway, we had all but decided that we would plant an Eastern red cedar cultivar, *Juniperus virginiana* 'Emerald Sentinel'. I had seen these plants and admired them, but I had never lived with one, and after pricking my fingers on the deceptively soft-looking needles of a specimen we chanced upon at Chanticleer, I had a

change of heart. We already have an entire hedge of sharp-leaved hollies that only a masochist could enjoy weeding beneath, and, as the garden's main weeder, I had no desire to plant another prickly-leaved evergreen. Instead of the cedars, we planted three tall, multi-stemmed specimens of *Aronia arbutifolia*—a deciduous native shrub or small tree with red "chokeberries" that the robins devour each winter—and built a cedar fence behind them to screen out the neighbors.

All our discussions and arguments in search of the right plant for each place and all the time and energy we expend on creating and maintaining our garden is aimed at bringing more beauty into our lives, and the world. In this desire we are no different from most serious gardeners we know and, like them, we feel compelled to share our creation with others. This impulse goes far beyond the desire to flaunt or boast. When the stars



Tom wanted gravel paths for the garden; I was worried about how it was going to be retained. Tom created the edges for the paths by laying wide pieces of bluestone vertically in mortar. Like icebergs, these pieces are now mostly hidden by the soil on the bed side and the gravel on the other. Many seeds germinate in the gravel; some we leave and others we either weed out or transplant to other areas of the garden.

When digging in the beds along the paths, we keep soil from spilling into the gravel by either placing a wheelbarrow right at the edge to hold the excess soil, or covering the gravel with a tarp as we work.



Mazus reptans, planted between bluestone steps in back of house, fills gaps between the stones, and is tolerant of some foot traffic. Be aware that this is a vigorous plant that will overrun adjacent perennials if left unchecked. It will also need to be trimmed off the stones a couple of times a year. For this job, I use regular scissors, following along the edge of the stones to create perfect straight edges.



align and nature provides just the right amounts of the necessary elements, the results can be astounding, even if we've seen the same plant flower in the same place for twenty years running. Sharing this astonishment is a spiritual exercise for many of us. We invite others to stand beside us to witness a creation for which we can take only partial credit. A

gardener's interactions with the natural world are fragile and fraught with opportunities for failure, the results always ephemeral, and any successes we have are only by the grace or whim of some higher power. Gardening is all about channeling this power into our personal patches of earth, then hoping for the best.



Adam Levine is the author of numerous articles and a handful of books about gardening. He is currently working with David Culp on a book about the garden at Brandywine Cottage; and someday he hopes to write a book about his own tiny garden. Adam and Tom's garden, along with those of many HPS/MAG members, welcomes visitors throughout the gardening season. You can contact them at adambomb99@gmail.com.

Ed Note: Photos by Adam Levine. To view a color version of the photos, go to the HPS/MAG web site, www.hardyplant.org.