

# SNIFFING OUT A FELLOW GARDENER

*TWG Editor: A favorite journalist, Barbara Mahany, writes expressively, humorously, and regularly for The Chicago Tribune. In the process of writing an article on "how gardeners sniff each other out", she turned to moi for moi's opinion. This was my response:*

Good question, Mahany, certainly an intriguing one. The idea would make a very funny cartoon, gardeners sniffing each other... I've always thought that perhaps other gardeners weren't quite sure of me, but your question raises the possibility that they sniffed me out and didn't particularly like what they sniffed! Much like the sideways glance that one sneaks if the foul odor of say, fresh mushroom compost wafts across your nostrils, but you think the smell just might be a personal problem deriving from the onion soup last night. What relief when you notice that steam of a somewhat sulphuric nature is still poufing out of those newly-delivered piles of dirt.

Anyway, my answer is that it depends on what the gardener is interested in sniffing. You see, there are all manner of gardeners, and the type of gardening associate that each group wishes to sniff out differs entirely based on their predilection for society.

For example, many a woman enjoys the company of other women, especially during the mid-morning or luncheon hours. This woman will sniff around town for the name of the membership chair of the local garden club. She does not mind jumping through hoops (landmines, sometimes) to get into this neighborly club, or working her buns off to weed, plant, or fundraise in order to enjoy some light conversation with her well-mannered neighbors. She is a truly well-intentioned sniffer, who always receives the benefit of eating great food served elegantly.

On the other end of the spectrum is the man or woman who is organically minded.

This gardener wants to sniff out other humans who aim to save the planet through organic technique, heirloom seed saving, feng shui, and the plentiful purchase of clothing made of green cotton. This person sniffs first at the community block club, then the Cooperative Extension Service, then begins to read *Conscious Choice* magazine. This person will head to Wisconsin to take part in a Michael Fields Institute conference and later will happily begin to purchase weekly vegetables from a cooperative farming syndicate. This person sniffs out sustainable friendships and may even judge another gardener on his distaste for "RoundUp Ready" crops.

Another, quite different gardener, has recently installed a \$10,000 "water feature" from winnings from the riverboat casino. This is a gardener who really only wants to sniff out other pond owners, comparison shopping all along the way. The best filter, the ultimate waterfall, the most rare koi, and "who installed *your* water feature?" are paramount interests to this gardener. The water feature gardener makes a point of attending the entire three-day suburban "pond tour" each summer. Let me assure you that this gardener relishes being on the mailing list for "My Home is Better than Yours" magazine.

There are literally dozens of other sniffs which could be discussed. There are gardeners who wish only to know people willing to exchange free plants. There are gardeners who only seek out others with gazebos. There are those who really don't wish to sniff out other gardeners, but who wish to be sniffed: these are the gardeners who open their ultra-fine gardens to the public each year so that the public can have a big whiff of what they are unable to achieve. Ever.

And then there's people who just LOVE plants. These are people who sniff out other people who love to get down on their hands

and knees and sniff out the teensy-tiniest little flower that grows only 2" tall. These are the gardeners who read books loaded with botanical names, but who might not be able to remember them in conversation with a fellow plant maniac. But both gardeners seem to innately know that it is ok that neither can say the botanical name: in the silence they are simply appreciating the way a wispy pink tuft drapes itself across the furrowed blue leaf of its neighbor. These people may only correspond when there is a new plant to be sought out, an unidentified seedling to be identified, or a particularly lovely hue of periwinkle to be appreciated. They don't mind a whit if they only see each other on these memorable gardening occasions and never in-between, for when these gardeners sniff, they are only inhaling the joy of gardening.

Thanks for asking my views, Barbara. Sniff, sniff with love always,

PS: I started *The Weedpatch Gazette* because I hadn't been able to sniff out any maniacal plant lovers within my home "territory", so to speak. These people tend not to clump. They are often solitary creatures, rarely joining anything that might require socializing about anything OTHER than plants. And the only way I've been able to find them yet is to have my cranky, crotchety quarterly be passed from hand to hand, often accompanied by a terse recommendation such as "Read This". I can't imagine where I'd advertise, for example, although *The Weedpatch Gazette* usually ends up selling well to people who listen to public radio. Bonafide plant lovers (the people who tell me that their annual budgets for plants are "totally ga-ga") are an odd lot. ♣