

Life

Jody Headlee: Book says mindful gardening can be meditative

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By Jody Headlee

“The Meditative Gardener — cultivating mindfulness of body, feelings and mind” by Cheryl Wilfong, though well written, may not be an overly easy read, but it is like unlocking one door after another to a garden that you weren’t aware was there and immediately want to learn more about.

It is distributed by Pathway Book Service at (800) 345-6665 or pbs@pathwaybook.com. The paperback retails at \$35 plus shipping. For further information contact one of the above.

Since I have always been pleased by gardening, the book’s name alone provided the impetus for me to call and request a review copy. The author responded positively, and I was in for a surprise.

I popped open the pages and discovered there wasn’t a word on the functional techniques of gardening but one lesson after another marrying the joys of meditating and gardening.

Wilfong loves to garden — so much so that she took a Master Gardener course from her local county’s community extension service and relishes sharing what she has learned by book and practice with fellow gardeners, as do I.

Unlike me, however, at the same time, she started to work the soil, she also began to cultivate a compelling introduction to meditation accompanied by teachings of the Buddha’s messages from the Dharma.

I found her findings fascinating.

“To begin with, I meditated irregularly,” she wrote.

“It was a little like gardening without a guide and without attending to the basics — the soil.

“You can do it, but really the chances of success with flowers and meditation improve greatly when a teacher or a book whose wisdom and experience can guide you.”

Her hope for readers of her book is that they discover it to be a field guide to at least a few suggestions and see what happens.

Prime in the experience is goodwill, which “begins with a basic friendliness toward yourself, like the conventional wisdom that says ‘You can’t love someone else if you don’t love yourself.’ ”

She points out that beginning meditators will discover practical, easy steps to follow, while lapsed meditators will refresh older patterns, if not forgotten or completely misplaced, and seasoned meditators will be introduced to a variety of practices that can be “transplanted into daily life in the garden.”

The deeper you get into the book, the more you recognize Wilfong’s deliberately tying the threads of a garden with the threads of meditation, her ultimate goal, a wisdom far beyond simple digging.

“You can read all of the ‘how to’ books on gardening, and there are many (I know because I have shelves of them), but not until you’ve dug your hands in the earth will you be a gardener.”

She writes on and closes her findings.

“Only you know your own soils, the microclimates of your yard, and how the sun and shade work in your garden.”

Both experiences are step-by-step practices that develop proficiency with practice, and Wilfong agrees that meditation too can be learned from books.

“But not until you begin sitting yourself will your practice bear fruit” as your garden won’t grow and blossom until it has been planted, nourished and maintained.

She has learned her lessons well, becoming a Master Gardener in 1999, graduating from Community Dharma Leader program sponsored by Spirit Rock Meditation and from the Integrated Study and Practice Program at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

She also teaches at Vermont Insight Meditation Center, spends as many hours as she can in her thriving garden and sets aside time to write books and share what she has gleaned from the two disciplines.

As I said, her findings are fascinating and thought provoking — as are the many colored photographs illustrating “The Meditative Gardener.”

It’s well worth the effort to launch your own investigation.

Jody Headlee is a contributing columnist for The Oakland Press. Contact her at thegoodlife@oakpress.com.

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