

## **Benefits of Being a Lazy Gardener** **By Rebecca Miller-Cripps**

There are times when I feel guilty after looking at other gardeners' excellently-cared-for lawns and gardens, brilliant with flowers or producing copious amounts of food, bristling with highly-designed drip irrigation systems or full of native plants. When I expressed to a neighboring home owner how impressed I was with her garden and fruit orchard, she talked about the amount of time it took and how much work it is. In comparison, I have become a laissez-faire gardener. "Laissez-faire"? It means to allow things to take their own course, without interference. Over time I have assuaged my guilt by counting ways in which being a lazy gardener has worked for me.

**1. Sometimes nature will do your pruning for you.** When I moved into my house, the backyard contained a declining variegated box elder full of dead limbs. At a gardening seminar, a botanist told me, "Once those box elders start to fall apart, you just need to take them down."

I resisted. It provided the only shade in my backyard. Every few years I would prune out the newest dead branches and hope that I could nurse it along until other trees (baby oaks that I was nurturing) could take over as shade sources. One windy, stormy night this winter, as I was reading in bed, I heard a strange "tearing" sound and the ground shook. I jumped out of bed, grabbed my trusty flashlight and ran to the back patio. There, lying on the ground was the huge dead branch that I had contemplated so often. Nature had done the job for me!

A neighbor, who is a tree faller, came over and cut up the branch for me. "Do you want me to take down the whole tree?" "No, no," I said, "I'm trying to keep it going." A few weeks later during another very windy night, a huge live limb came down from the same tree. The mandate from nature was clear....the tree had to go. So, my long-suffering neighbor came back and cut the tree to a stump.

When one of my sons came to visit, he asked, "Are you going to plant something to replace it or just let nature take its course?" "I'm going to let nature take its course and see what happens," I replied. "Suckers" (non-variegated), from the root stock of the poor variegated box elder, are now over seven feet tall and starting to divide into branches. Maybe my shade will come back after all.

**2. Pests become less pesty.** Several years ago, a Master Gardener friend pointed out soldier beetles (family Cantharidae) on a rose bush. They eat insect eggs and also act as pollinators. I had done nothing to attract them. This year I noticed large milkweed bugs, *Oncopeltus fasciatus*, on the plants I've added for migrating monarch butterflies. Listed as a "nuisance," the integrated pest management advice for managing them? "Live with them." (They feed on milkweed plants and their time in the garden is short.) Exactly my style of gardening! And paper wasps (family Vespidae) are building a nest under the eave of my garage. Even though my son-in-law was appalled at "dangerous" wasps in such close proximity to our activities, the wasps are welcome in my garden. Unless their nest is directly threatened, they are non-aggressive. According to the University of California Integrated Pest Management website (<http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7450.html>), "Most social wasps provide an

extremely beneficial service by eliminating large numbers of other pest insects through predation and should be protected and encouraged to nest in areas of little human or animal activity.”

**3. My immediate environment has knit together.** Recently, I’ve been spending the delightful mornings of these hot days having my coffee in the backyard. The amount of activity amazes me. Frogs and lizards; baby praying mantises; bees, wasps and butterflies of all kinds; dragonflies; and the birds – robins, California towhees, goldfinches, and the Bullock’s orioles that seem to refuse to leave for the winter. All are in motion.

Plants also seem to be creating their own reality. A miniature grove of volunteer young oaks protects the many birds. The California fuchsia sends up new shoots with no attention from me. The only tomatoes growing in my vegetable garden this year are volunteers from last year’s fallen fruit. The pumpkins setting fruit in the same veggie garden were free left-overs at a fruit stand after Halloween that I broke apart and threw into the mulch. Sprawling grapevines, a gift from another Master Gardener friend, help shade my side yard from the blistering sun.

Now, I do not recommend being lazy when doing so would be dangerous to life or property. For example, I had assessed that the dead limbs on the box elder were not overhanging the house. And the paper wasp nest is in an area where there is little human activity. But, in safe situations, being lazy seems to produce results that I find delightful.

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