

## ON COMMUNITY: Exploring the power and strength of community to promote a better and enduring future

# The spirit of those in the garden



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I pulled a pesky weed with long octopus tendrils snaking over the dirt floor of Rose Haven's Randolph Memorial Gardens at 8:45 p.m. a couple of nights ago.

With Bella, my trusty canine gardening companion, tethered a few feet away, I reached down once again to yank out a weed's roots that had the gall to poke out of the mulch and a layer of cardboard we had laid down to suffocate it and its weedy-like kind.

I'd come to Rose Haven that night, like others this summer, to water and nourish the plants we wanted to thrive despite the heat and days without rain. My presence also advanced my one-person vendetta against weeds. I considered myself an empathetic guy. Being able to understand what others might be feeling or going through in recovery or reintegration formed one of the planks of our wellness and resilience program. That compassion did not extend to weeds. Lately, there is no such thing as clemency for weeds. Not even Susan Wittig Albert's "one person's weed is another person's wildflower" can move me to spare weeds.

My actions also channeled my mother. Morning and evening in the dog days of Illinois summers when I was growing up, 'til the last days she lived in her house in Des Moines, she performed weed patrol. With purpose and meaning, she protected her roses and the supporting cast of annuals and perennials.

I stabbed my arthritic fingers into the dirt and grabbed what I thought was a root and pulled out a stem with no root tendrils attached, not a one. Crap. Once again, my fingers went into the dirt, dug a little deeper and pulled again. Out came a smaller stem, still without the root. I tried with both hands, fingers burrowing deeper still, and pulled harder, forcing more dirt under my worn fingernails and stumbling backwards as this time, nothing came up. Tenacious weed, I groused (though I can't write what I really muttered). On my knees, I excavated with the same results, dirt minus root.

With beads of sweat tricking down my cheeks, I sat back on my haunches and looked around for inspiration. I spotted and retrieved a sharp-edged rusty piece of iron by the front porch dug up when we excavated the gardens. Then I was back down on my knees hacking away with an 80-year-old metal fragment around the little nub of stem poking up, daring me to come and get it.

I did.

And left a larger hole and the scattered remains of mulch and decomposing cardboard littered about, exposing a few more of the weed's friends.

Finally, fat knuckles throbbing, little light remained to spot more weeds. Not surprisingly, it was already 9:15 when I slid behind the wheel of my old Kia SUV. Where had the evening gone?

I knew.

When I was young, I'd asked my mother why she spent so much time weeding. Therapy, she replied. I didn't know then she was struggling with depression. As gardening genes switched on within me during my mother's last years, I began to understand why she resisted moving from home and garden into an independent living facility. Gardening and weed control kept her mind and body in the moment and resilient to the stresses of life beyond her control. Running, biking, swimming, surfing, doing yoga on paddleboards, and a host of other physical activities steer our mind from stress and adversity and the harmful emotions that swirl around it. Yanking a weed or balancing a downward dog pose on a paddleboard also manages the harmful consequences of stress on the body while engaging the positive neurobiological effects — even if you slide into the water.

Time becomes irrelevant in the moment. For two hours that evening, I left the ills of life outside the arbor that welcomes people to the haven of our gardens. The gardens, and their weeds, are a perfect companion for female Veterans in recovery.

Look for fingernails with dirt, and you'll find attached folks with the spirit of my mother.

Resilient gardens cultivate resiliency.

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