THE HUMBLE ANNALS OF A BACKYARD: CLEANING UP: NUMBER TWO: BY WALTER A. DYER

OU can tell a good gardener from a poor one by the number of weeds visible in his garden, but I know a subtler way of judging. I apply my test in November. In the spring an army of gardeners marked out their rows and sowed their seed with proper enthusiasm. Then came the first crop of weeds, and a few weak brothers and sisters fell from the ranks after gathering a handful of spindly radishes.

Then came more weeds, and a further defection.

In July came an early drought. The peas dried up, the lettuce wilted, and even the corn looked sickly. The salvation of the garden was water for the lettuce and faithful cultivation for the corn, and only the Old Guard stood by through the heat and burden of the day.

By fall only a remnant made any pretense at gardening. Beans and corn had been gathered; the tomatoes took care of themselves. Only the faithful kept up the fight for the love of it; only a tried and true Gideon’s band remained.

But it is after the first killing frosts that the true test comes. The corn stalks stand brown and withered; the last ungathered tomato hangs shivereled upon its stem. The garden is a scene of desolation—a battle-field whence all have fled save the fallen. The dainty beauty of spring and the fulness of summer have departed. It is no place for the dilettante gardener; most of the backyards on our street are deserted.

But over in Neighbor Burt’s yard I see a lonely figure poking around among the debris. (It was Neighbor Burt’s Golden Bantam corn that beat us all.) Now he is standing amid the desolation like a widow in a graveyard. His loved ones are dead.

But Neighbor Burt is no faint heart. He is not mourning; listen, he is whistling. He is pulling up his dead plants and vines and piling them neatly for the burning. Soon an aromatic odor will be borne to me; Neighbor Burt will be burning sweet incense to Ceres. And I know that he will find something to do until the snow covers his garden—and then he will begin looking for next spring’s seed catalogues to arrive and will begin planning what varieties of dahlia bulbs he will buy.

By these tokens I know that Neighbor Burt and I are two members of the Brotherhood of Year-Round Gardeners.

To me there is a vast deal of satisfaction in cleaning up. I crave orderliness as some folks crave excitement. And there is the satisfac-
tion, too, that comes only from a work that is well done, completed, finished.

I believe that half our restlessness and discontent is due to our inability to finish things. Life is a ceaseless round; duties overlap and crowd each other. It is hard to get the breakfast dishes out of the way and the beds made before it is time to start dinner, and the average housewife is eternally oppressed with the haunting realization of a hundred unfinished tasks. We men folks come home from the office or the shop with our minds full of things we have dropped in the middle, and some of us never finish them until some one folds our hands across our breasts and says, “It is all over.”

But the man or woman who works out of doors with things that grow and bear fruit may taste a little of the heavenly joy of things accomplished. For God, who is wiser than our other employers, has appointed the seasons, and has ordained that each year shall come to an end, whether we will or no.

The fruit ripens and is gathered; the leaves fall and the sap runs back into the roots. No overweening ambition, no feverish desire for more time, more time, can stop it. Soon comes winter to seal the earth in compulsory rest. But before it comes Neighbor Burt and I go forth into our gardens and clean up, and we alone of all the people on our block know the joy the craftsman feels when he puts the last fond touches on his work and sees that it is good.