

The Garden From the Outside Looking In

BY JONN KARSSEBOOM

I've noticed more than once unfortunately, that since I've entered the modern era (after say, 2013) I've developed an insane habit of looking at my smartphone during any spare, empty moment.

In the beginning, my innocent rationale for doing so was in the name of "productivity". Why have a spare moment anyway? With a flick of my thumb (or any available finger for that matter) I was able to check on calls I needed to make, emails I needed to answer and appointments for which I needed to arrive promptly.

And from a gardener's perspective the device itself was otherworldly. The sleek, smooth, rectangle with its spaceship-like shell and hand-friendly rounded edges was in direct contrast to anything found in the garden. Thus, I kept it safely in my most comfortable, easily-accessed pocket away from all of the things that plants love: direct sunshine, natural rainfall and dirt.

Fast forward to just before last week. No longer in my pocket my smartphone found itself more comfortable to be always in my hand and within easy eye contact.

Spare moments are now instantaneous moments. When I walk across the nursery to fetch, this is going to sound made-up, a pail, I'll walk head down, screen expertly angled to my face, filling myself with admittedly not-so-vital information.

Within a mere 100 steps (I know this number because my phone keeps track) I'm able to check the weather, read a story on NPR along with the ongoing conversation in the comment section, and catch a guilty glimpse of some highly

inflated, politically charged, over simplified and factually shady meme on Facebook.

I didn't have to pause much either. On the return trip I found I could carry the pail in one hand and my phone in the other.

I grew worried that my habit would begin to encroach on other areas of my life. Had I become socially handicapped? No! I was often just fact-checking during the conversation.

Did I become an outlaw? No! The ten seconds while waiting for the light to change wasn't actually while driving I reasoned.

Why all the concern?

Not social skills and not even for safety reasons. At the end of the day in the garden the mental peace I

once enjoyed because of being in the garden had entirely vanished. In its place was a constant carnival of videos and facts and opinions.

For the uninitiated though, self-improvement is hard. Most plans (much like improving in gardening) call to keep things simple and set a low bar in the beginning. Then improve over time.

In other words I'd break my habit in a week.

I wouldn't put my phone away completely. My "rules" made exceptions to answer any calls or texts. (Communication was paramount.) I'd check my habitual sites to my curiosities' content only during meals... and only then if I was alone.

My first day under my new regime was quite literally a day in the garden. I experienced a new found freedom I had been missing

for some time and I laughed at myself for being worried that I could fail. Side note here: I caught myself grabbing my phone unconsciously 12 times before lunch. (That was once every 20 minutes by my calculations.)

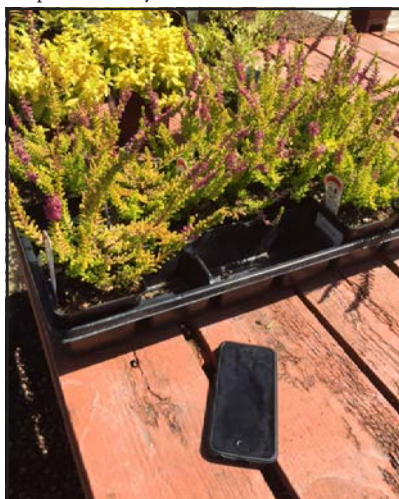
My real problems sprouted the following days. Being "in the moment", I found, can often be confused with a sense of boredom. Without my periodic doses of information from my smart phone, my mind wandered and my attention span suffered. I wasn't accustomed to this much time to think without some electronic interruption.

So instead of catching myself reaching into my pocket I now found myself catching myself during a scroll. Small improvements over time I thought, perhaps I was beginning with rules that were too tough.

The week didn't go well after that. By Friday I had shown no improvement and my habit had only gotten much worse. (Why wouldn't I want to look up pertinent information any time I'd like?) As I write this, I've accepted my failure.

I often hear from non-gardeners how they have a black thumb. That plants tremor when they walk past. Yet if we... ahem... dig deeper, that belief arose from some small mistake, some misunderstanding that if adjusted slightly would yield a much different result. In other words, some non-gardeners are but a hair root away from complete success.

I know that gardening teaches patience and perseverance. So I'll continue on my quest to regain control over my smart phone. Perhaps its because of gardening I found that those spare moments are something worth fighting for.



Jonn Karsseboom answers questions about all things in the garden. Email him: www.thegardencorner.com.