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Hope blooms again

After a move to Southern California, to a village where every plant flourishes, Cathleen Falsani thinks -- no, believes -- this will be the year she will at last be a successful gardener.

by [Cathleen Falsani](#)



iStock/Supsun

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*Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
And give us not to think so far away
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
All simply in the springing of the year.*

-- From "Prayer for Spring" by Robert Frost

Gardening is an inherently hopeful enterprise. We put the seeds or seedlings in the ground, water and watch, hoping that leaves will leaf, flowers will bloom, and fruit will appear sometime down the road.

Unfortunately for me, the green thumb does not appear to be one of those genetic marvels that transfer from one generation to the next.

My mother, Helen, is a wonderful gardener. She can grow almost anything with great success. She can take a dying, neglected plant and turn it into an explosion of hearty greenery and blooms as if by

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magic.

For as long as I can remember, my mother has had pots of finicky African violets strewn throughout her home in Connecticut. Even in the frigid, dark days of winter, her violets thrive, bursts of velvety, dark-green leaves and delicate purple and pink petals -- visceral reminders that, though the ground is frozen beneath a foot of packed snow, spring is just around the corner.

When I visit my parents' home in winter, and marvel at my mother's flourishing indoor garden, I'm reminded of something a rabbi friend of mine once told me about hope: Even in the dead of winter, the sap is already beginning to sap.

Helen's father, my grandfather, was famous for his rose garden. He spent many hours watering, fertilizing and pruning until his yard was a riot of color and the scent of roses wafted through the neighborhood.

Mom even has a Christmas cactus that belonged to my grandfather. Though the plant is more than 80 years old, for my mother and her magical green thumb, it still blossoms once or twice a year.

I, on the other hand, can kill almost anything. Even those nondescript, almost plasticine green plants that abide in every doctor's office I've ever visited. Six weeks in my home and they're brown and lifeless.

Still, I love gardening. Every spring I plan and choose and dig and water and wait. Hope springs eternal.

In my case, maybe it's a kind of stubborn faith that returns to me each March when the nurseries begin to stock flats of impatiens, poppies and marigolds, and hanging baskets stuffed with white bridal veil, canary-yellow strawflowers and bright, lantern-like fuchsia.

If faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen, then I am a faithful (if perennially unsuccessful) gardener.

Last summer, I moved from Chicago to Southern California, and my stubborn hope of someday being a successful gardener received a healthy dose of optimism. Here, in our village by the sea, seemingly everything flourishes.

Despite near-desert conditions and a constant state of water conservation, my neighbors' yards are bursting with blossoms of every hue. Bougainvillea pours over their walls. Claret, orange and sunset-yellow kangaroo paw plants grow as high as my waist. Bird of paradise blossoms peek over the top of my second-floor patio, held aloft by their two-story-high "tree."

Eucalyptus and orange trees scent the air. And hummingbirds flit from shrub to shrub outside my bedroom window, pulling sweet nectar from the orange, blue, red and hot-pink blossoms. I don't even know what the plants are called. But they are thriving, unattended, in what in my previous hometown would have been the height of blizzard season.

When spring arrived -- fully two months earlier than I'd ever experienced it in the Midwest or New England -- I was amazed to see a variety of succulents and giant jade plants blooming with pale pink blossoms. (Who knew jade had flowers?)

This is my year, I thought. No, I *believed* it.

After school one day last week, I drove my son out to the huge nursery in the canyon nearby to look for a few plants. Our jaws dropped at the spectacle before us. Every bloom, every sturdy stalk and tuber looked so hopeful. We chose a couple of night-blooming jasmine plants -- one in a hanging basket, another staked in a large pot so that it will crawl up our wall -- and an enormous hybrid lotus with flowers that look like tiny red-yellow-black-and-orange parrots.

"Don't forget to water them," the nursery manager said, kindly. "That's all they really need. But once they dry up -- that's it. They're done."

I am confident I can remember to water them. But God will have to do the rest.

One of my favorite literature professors from college is a consummate gardener. His backyard garden covers several acres and is always beautiful. A few years back, I visited him and we walked through his garden talking about flowers and faith.

“A person falls in love with nature, with plants, with the process of growing and seeing things go from seed to flower,” he said. “It teaches you something about life. It not only soothes the spirit, it brings a sense of peace and satisfaction. It’s kind of hard to put into words ... but it’s medicine for the spirit.”

The Creator is, of course, the constant gardener. I have to believe that God looks at me with the same kind of stubborn hope and faith with which I choose my (usually doomed) plants every spring.

Maybe this is the year, God must think, that she will blossom, flourish, bring forth fruit. Even when I choke on weeds and wither, God remains hopeful.

The promise of spring and a new beginning -- a new chance at life -- is one that never dies.