

Do the Little Resolutions Matter?

This is the week we dust off our perennial New Year Resolutions and pretend, contrary to experience, that 2008 will be the year we succeed. It is not that extra five pounds we are carrying around and would love to shed that is important. Forty pounds of course is another discussion. What is important is that we have space around us with clean air and clean water, for us and for our grandchildren.

Today our tap water is safe to drink and I expect a large percentage of the designer water bottles are sensibly filled and chilled at home. We are so fortunate! After thirty years of steady progress in cleaning up our polluted streams and lakes, the clean up was stymied by the Supreme Court decision (Rapanos) last June which has the potential to allow stream, ponds, and wetlands to slide out from under EPA regulations.

Actually, a new EPA report does warn that a lot of our water is getting dirtier. Following the Supreme Court decision, an appeals court overturned the conviction of a pipe manufacturing company and its employees. That company had been found guilty of ‘knowingly’ discharging grease, zinc, oil, and lead into Avondale Creek north of Birmingham, Alabama. Confused by the Rapanos decision, the court was not sure that Avondale was a “water of the US.”

You know, we dirt gardeners who never went to law school understand perfectly that case law depends on precedents but on the other hand we do recognize a stream when we see one. You will be heartened to know there is bipartisan support in both House and Senate to restore the intent of the Clean Water Act.

It isn't just the water you can see that needs to be kept clean but we have to pay attention to the toxic substances that move down from the surface to contaminate the water table itself. In kindergarten you learned that if you made a mess, you cleaned it up! But for 20 years a gap in one of our hazardous waste laws allowed mines and some other polluters to escape responsibility. Attempts are being made to insure that this gap be closed.

What each of us does with our own property does have an impact. We tend to think that because we can't issue an edict “stop blowing up mountain tops”, that our efforts are useless. Not so. Little resolutions add up to a healthier environment. Your back yard can be a “certified” wildlife haven if you follow a few simple steps. To start small, plant a native shrub that has berries for winter birds. Birds need water and if a pond is beyond your scope, a birdbath will do. A larger planting in a corner of your property can become a sheltered thicket for wildlife. The downside of this is that these wildlings will dine on your plants so you may have to take preventive measures to protect against these small marauders.

By adding birdhouses or a frog pond and subtracting chemical fertilizers and pesticides, by using mulch to retain water, you have become a candidate for certification. Check out the National Wildlife federation web site: www.nwf.org/backyard

Sadly most resolutions are made to be broken but I try to salvage a few shards that make gardening easier and more fun. Lists help. Once the last standing perennials topple and all the leaves are gone it is easy to see the bones of your landscape plan, or the lack of plan most of us live with. Walk around and find beauty in the empty spaces and resolve to leave them empty. One resolution – hatched from the time, muscle, money realities, not virtue: “cut the to-do lists in half!”

Be realistic about the time you have available for yard work. Everything takes twice as long as the time we allot for it. There is nothing joyful about working against the clock. For example, ask yourself if your hedge really needs to be clipped so often. Take a tip from a teen-ager – let it grow. Another take-it-easy suggestion: limit the pots. Unless your garden is scheduled to appear in “Virginia Living” a few will do. Those things are large and heavy and hard to haul about on steps and decks. Lush masses of potted plants may be lovely in a magazine display, but it could tend toward pretentious in a home garden. In a small one like mine the aspect of too many containers teeters between messy and ridiculous.

I hope you find peace in your garden every day of this New Year.