

A Short Guide to Successful Gardening in the Time of War

by Olga Kornyushyna

In loving memory of
Andriy Romanov, killed
in action April 26, 2024

The first condition for successful gardening at any given time, war included, is to know how to plant things.

I am a city child. Growing up I never planted a single flower or any plant for that matter. It was only a couple of years before the war started in 2014 that I became an owner of the small village house in the northeast of Ukraine in Chernihiv Oblast.

My first attempts at gardening were quite fruitless. On top of my total lack of experience, the soil around here is not very conducive to growing anything. It is mainly pure sand or a mixture of sand with soil. It took me years, and many dried up trees, to figure out what will grow and what will most likely not. I treat it as an experiment. My main achievement is the flowerbed with about fifteen different kinds of juniper. Thyme and some local succulents help to displace grass that tends to overtake everything. I used to have a great collection of tulips that I bought in Amsterdam. But the moles moved them around, so they grow quite randomly in unexpected places. I also had many lavender plants but only one persevered. Magnolia didn't survive the harsh climate. My two hibiscus bushes managed to adapt. The roses are doing very well, all things considered. There are literally hundreds of irises that grow everywhere. The only problem with them is that when they are in blossom there are so many mosquitoes around it is not easy to enjoy anything outside.

Gardening became a process of healing and discovery for me. Maintaining the boundaries of the flowerbeds, grounding myself while working with soil,

Close Encounters in War Journal – Back to the light
May 7, 2022

developing a connection with the plants and other living beings in the garden, synchronizing with the natural cycle of the seasons, developing courage to experiment and plant something that might not survive, not getting discouraged and trying again and again. These are just a few requirements of gardening. If my efforts bear fruit in the form of actual flowers, bushes, and trees, it is an added bonus. Every spring and every summer I came to the village to dig, rake, mow grass, plant flowers, new junipers and possibly some zucchinis and tomatoes right on the flowerbed.

My gardening efforts were forcibly stopped in 2022. In 2023 after my return to the village from the haven of Europe I planted just one juniper and three chrysanthemums.

The second condition for successful gardening in the time of war is to be alive to do it. Despite the best efforts of the invading army.

In May of 2023 I finally packed my car, loaded the dog and the cat (my constant companions) and started driving from Austria where I had found temporary refuge after escaping the Russians in March 2022, back to Ukraine. The official version was that I would come back just for a few months and then go abroad again. But if possible, I wanted to stay. It was not the best time to come back. Kyiv was attacked with missiles every night. But there is no good time to come back to war, is there? So I took my chances.

I had been back once before in November 2022. That time after staying overnight in Lviv I really had to prepare myself for the remaining road back. One must drive on the M06 road that leads to the capital from the direction of Zhytomyr. The so-called Zhytomyr highway became known as the death road in the spring of 2022.¹ It is here that the Russian Army shot civilian vehicles in Makariv Raion with families trying to evacuate from the heavy fighting. Every single case was well investigated and documented later. I was stuck in Yasnohorodka village for the first two weeks of the invasion, not far from M06.² We were able to escape by some obscure village roads with no navigation, no road

¹ <https://texty.org.ua/articles/110825/mass-murder-zhytomyr-highway-map-chronology-and-investigation-russian-war-crimes/>.

² <https://closeencountersinwar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/korniyushyna-there-are-no-atheists-in-the-war-zone.pdf>.

signs. Just from one check-point to the next. Never knowing what and who waited around the corner.

A year after the events my friend told me that at the time he helped with the surveillance and flew drones above the roads that we took on our escape route. According to him there was at least one “lost” Russian armored infantry vehicle and about twenty Russian soldiers wandering around the roads. We were lucky to not have met them. Nevertheless, the M06 road signs with the names of the villages and towns where the atrocities took place filled me with a sense of dread.

I once read somewhere that trauma makes us lose pieces of our soul. So, I thought about the road trip along the death road as picking up the pieces of my soul. Maybe it was too early for that, but do we really have the luxury of time? I don’t think so. The weather was nasty, and I had to concentrate on driving. Every time I would see the ruins of buildings, houses, gas stations or just the blackened road signs that read Moschun, Makariv, Motyzhyn, or Buzova, I would quiet my mind, take a calm breath, and put a palm over my heart. In this way I paid my respects and ritualistically claimed the lost pieces of my soul back. At least those that were ready to be picked up again. And it was just the beginning. My pilgrimage along the highways that the invaders turned into death roads continued.

The third condition for successful gardening in the time of war is the ability to physically get to the garden.

The village and my house were on my mind since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. It is just 80 miles away from the border on the left bank of the river Seim. Traditionally, the east bank is called the left bank and the west bank is called the right bank. It means that when the invasion started and the bridge was blown off by the Ukrainian authorities, the village was cut off. At the same time, it saved this region from the Russians. They crossed further south and never set foot in these parts. I hope it stays this way! However, back in 2022 the village and the surrounding areas were in so called silent occupation. It was well behind enemy lines. After a few months pressured by the Ukrainian Army the Russians retreated from Chernihiv Oblast leaving behind well documented and terrible war crimes practically everywhere they set foot. Our village was blessed and spared this fate.

There were two more roads that called my name and filled me with the sense of foreboding at the same time – the M01 Kyiv-Chernihiv and M02 Hlukhiv-Bryansk-Moscow, as it is still announced in this way by my Waze navigator. As I came back to Kyiv, I was counting days to go back to the village. After being gone for over a year it was not that easy to arrange. Also, the bridge was still not repaired, and it was not advisable to go off the main road or even pull up onto the shoulder due to the mines. Finally, in July 2023, backed by my friend who agreed to go with me for his vacation, I loaded the dog and the cat once more and off we went, driving on M01 highway towards Chernihiv. I was bracing myself for what I would see there.

As I struck north-west from Kyiv in the first weeks of the full-on war, the Russians also advanced from the north-east in several directions, road M01 included. The fighting was heavy and the villages along the road were seriously hit. My previous drive here was on my way back from my country house after celebrating the New Year of 2022 with my friends and neighbors there. I've been driving back and forth on this road for the last ten years. I remember the houses and the landmarks very well. Many of them were turned into ruins. I saw piles of rubble where I remembered houses. The village of Zalissya was especially destroyed from what I could see along the road. I was driving and just taking it all in.

The fourth condition for successful gardening in the time of war is to keep sane by any means necessary.

I've been going back and forth all summer and got used to the view. But I never got over it. I don't know about the pieces of my soul. I think I collect some and I lose some at the same time. Many years ago, my Buddhist teacher gave me a small statue filled with rare and precious relics. It is said to contain powerful blessings. When I need to make sense of everything that does not make any sense, including my comings and goings along these roads, I think that maybe I am on a mission to drive the relics where so many lives were lost and where the traces of suffering are tangible. Sometimes I think about my car, the dog, the cat and myself as the company of travelling relics. This way I feel like I am on a mission. I carry a heart relic of the Tibetan saint, the founder of the well know lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, and the relic from the previous Buddha Kashyapa in my purse. I'd like to think this has meaning and it is not a coincidence.

Close Encounters in War Journal – Back to the light
May 7, 2022

This is another side effect of connecting with the land. You tend to become mystically inclined. Even when you are a Ph.D. like I am. I can swear that I could feel my junipers calling to me when I was away for so long. My neighbors claimed that even when I was not there, they could feel something special in the yard. It was not wild or unwelcoming. It seemed like all the work, care, and positive attitude I invested created a lasting feeling of sanctuary.

The fifth condition for successful gardening in the time of war is to know the answers to existential questions.

As I write this essay it is April 2024. I am once again in my country house. I drove myself, the dog and the cat here to get away from the air alarms of Kyiv for a few weeks and to clean up after winter. It is a somewhat questionable direction to go for a gardening retreat, since we are just 80 miles from the border with Russia and the Russians keep bombing the villages along the border. The other day they dropped a guided bomb onto the village about 70 miles from where we are. A bit too close for comfort even though it is quiet in our neck of the woods. There is a strong feeling of being at the frontier.

I am faced with a maintenance dilemma. It looks like Putin is gearing up for the next offensive. There is no way to really tell what is in store for us. Chernihiv Oblast is getting prepared even though now the enemy presence at the border is not sufficient for a full-scale advancement. In any case there is an uneasy feeling. People are whispering about their fears if you speak to them long enough. While I study reports of the military experts and prognosis by the western media, my fence needs some serious fixing. Does it make sense to invest money in a new fence at this point of space and time? Does it make sense to buy and grow new plants? I was looking at raspberry bushes at the market. What if the Russians attack? Does it make sense to grow raspberries? But what if they don't and I don't have any raspberries during the summer? Just a couple of years ago these would be just every day mundane questions, a matter of calculating savings, time, and effort. Now the questions of replacing a fence, doing some landscaping and growing raspberries are existential. Suddenly, I receive inspiration from an unexpected source.

The sixth condition for successful gardening in the time of war is dedication to the plants' wellbeing.

A few houses down the street lives the family of my neighbor, A. He enlisted in the territorial defense in 2021 about six months before the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine. Now he is fighting at the front line, the real ground zero in Donetsk Oblast. He is a young man. His wife stays in the village with their two small kids. Before the war he used to work as an assistant gardener in a small private garden center. Now he has found an almost destroyed garden center very near the frontline. The center is almost destroyed. It's been bombed and burned repeatedly. However, some plants survived. A told his wife that he knows how much work goes into growing such plants, so he tries to save at least some of them. He digs them out among the rubble (even occasional body parts) secures the roots, brings them to the nearest post office when he can (yes, there are post offices some kilometers away from the frontline that still function) and ships them to the small town across the river from our village.

His wife received two small cypresses, one spruce and two thuja. It was a bit much to plant having to look after two small kids, so she presented me with one thuja. Now I am an owner of the internally displaced evacuated plant from the front. I put a lot of thought on where to plant it. I prepared the mixture of soil that should be good for this type of tree. Once I planted it, I ran my hand over it and talked to the tree for a bit. I told the tree that I hope the worst is behind, that it would grow well here, and the invaders will never set foot anywhere near. I sound strange enough already talking to trees, driving the relics around and collecting pieces of my soul, so it will not make things any worse if I tell you that I lit an incense stick and put it next to the tree. After all there was somebody's leg lying next to it when A. dug it out. It calls for at least a small ritual. The poor tree's seen too much. I feel like I must make it feel better. I also feel this is a story that needs to be told.

About half an hour after I decided that I would write an essay about it, I hear a very specific sound and my house shakes a little bit. The dog runs outside barking. The weather channel says there is a big thunderstorm coming our way. Simultaneously I receive an air alarm warning on my phone. I try to orient and decide – is it thunder or do I hear ballistic missiles, artillery or bombs? The news channel reports there were no missiles fired. It seems to be thunder after all. Two days after there is the loud sound of ballistic missile explosions in the neighboring

Sumska Oblast. The dog barks, the cat looks up, I check my phone to see what's up and then follow the direction of the Russian ballistic missiles for about an hour. While falling asleep I make plans for planting seven miscunthus plants that I mail ordered from a gardening center in Odesa.

I am moving forward with my landscaping ideas. I also received an estimate on the fence. The jury is still out on whether this is practical or totally insane.

Making a leap of faith is the seventh and final condition for successful gardening in the time of war.

Epilogue

I have finished writing this essay on April 21, 2024. My neighbor Andriy Romanov was killed in action defending Ukraine in a tank battle near Klishchiivka on April 26, 2024. He served as a mortarman in the National Guard of Ukraine. His brothers in arms highly valued Andriy as a courageous and experienced warrior. He is survived by his wife and three children of seven, four and two, and his mother. The gardening center from where I bought miscunthus plants was destroyed by the direct missile attack on Odessa on May 1, 2024. Thousands of plants and trees were burned, the warehouses and offices destroyed. Luckily there were no casualties among the employees. The owners of the company released the video of the devastation and plan to restore the company and to continue their gardening efforts.