

Dharma in the Dirt



Sara Remington for The New York Times

Wendy Johnson tends to her compost in Muir Beach, Calif. [More Photos >](#)

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MUIR BEACH, Calif.

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Sara Remington for The New York Times
Her garden is near the Green Gulch Farm Zen Center, where she lived for 25 years. [More Photos »](#)

AS a proudly Birkenstocked Zen gardener, Wendy Johnson can mindfully muster up affection for many of the earth's species, with the possible exception of persimmon-devouring gophers.

But poison hemlock holds a special place in her heart.

Without the presence of this pernicious carrot look-alike, a potent vertigo-inducing poison that when ingested can cause death, she reasons, her garden would be all cloying lilac- and lily-scented perfection — boring, in short. The innocent-looking malevolent weed, which she allows to flourish for its capacity to draw rich minerals from the soil for compost, “gives the garden its punch,” she said, “snapping me back to my senses.”

Like her beloved hemlock, Ms. Johnson has deep taproots in California. Her own garden, bordered by a mountain creek with a view of the Pacific Ocean, lies down the road from the Green Gulch Farm Zen Center, where she helped pioneer the concept of organic gardening in the United States. Now the farm's unofficial gardener emeritus, she lived at Green Gulch for 25 years, marrying, raising her two children and growing produce for Greens Restaurant, which was founded by the Center in 1979.

Long before [Michael Pollan](#) and [Barbara Kingsolver](#) wrote best-selling books about eating foods grown locally, Ms. Johnson, with a long-necked English watering can perpetually in hand, was cultivating an awareness of how lettuce grown au naturel can also feed the soul.

“You should taste this place,” she said, offering a visitor dried lemon verbena tea from the garden, her wide eyes bringing to mind a surprised lemur.

It is a cliché to say that gardening is meditative. But few have meditated as long and as earnestly as Ms. Johnson, who arrived at “the Gulch” with a sweaty Kelty backpack in

1975 after trekking much of the way from Tassajara, a rugged Zen outpost in the Ventana Wilderness. In her new book, "Gardening at the Dragon's Gate: At Work in the Wild and Cultivated World" — part memoir, part *Sunset Magazine* sitting on the floor mindfully eating a raisin in the zendo — she ponders such questions as whether it's O.K. for life-embracing Buddhists to crush snails (ask forgiveness first) or to trap gophers (breathe deep, then fence instead).

For Ms. Johnson, who occasionally waters the Buddha statue in her greenhouse to, as she says, "bring him to life a little bit," gardening is about far more than Gravenstein apple trees or David Austin heirloom roses. It is to literally know "the heart and mind of your place," and in so doing, to know your own heart and mind as well. "I am often most alert and settled in the garden when I am working hard, hip deep in a succulent snarl of spring weeds," she writes. "My mind and body drop away then, far below wild radish and bull thistle, and I live in the rhythmic pulse of the long green throat of my work."

Her looks betray her place: an unapologetic 60, Ms. Johnson has earthmother-y white hair, liver spots, knee socks and gnarly rose-scratched hands that horrify her two fashionable younger sisters in New York and Los Angeles. ("We'd look like you if we didn't take care of ourselves!" they tell her — lovingly, she insists.)

Her primer on meditation and gardening is similarly steeped in northern California, a place where, since the 1960s, cultivation of the land and the self have been intertwined. Less widely known than *Chez Panisse* or the zen center's own restaurant, *Greens*, the farm has influence that has nevertheless extended far beyond its terroir, a fertile dragon-shaped swath of what was once compressed ocean bottom at the foot of Mount Tamalpais.

From it germinated a movement toward "conscious eating and conscious growing, linked with the ethic of taking care of the land," said Randolph Delehanty, a San Francisco historian. The organic Buddhists, led by Ms. Johnson; her husband, Peter Rudnick; and two influential teachers, Alan Chadwick and Harry Roberts, were "among the first people to take the idea of stewardship of the land and make a lifestyle out of it," said Fred Bové, the former education director for the San Francisco Botanical Garden Society.

As a gardener, Ms. Johnson combines the conventional and the not-so. She grows roses and apple trees but also advocates compost and manure teas to boost the immune systems of plants (add 2-3 cups well decomposed compost or live manure per gallon of water; steep for 3 days). A columnist for *Tricycle*, the Buddhist magazine, she occasionally lapses into the woo-woo in the book, defining "inter-being" as "looking mindfully at broccoli and beet plants" and knowing that you are all one.

In her own garden, which she describes as "wild and bestial," a hot tub deemed ugly on the deck is concealed by tangles of jasmine, narcissus and other plants, including several opium poppies. "The bees love them," she observed of the poppies. "They're medicating themselves right and left."

The hot tub overlooks a pond filled with rainwater where otters occasionally do the backstroke and frogs make chirping sounds at night (she holds the phone over the pond to comfort her daughter, Alisa, a freshman at Bard, when she is homesick). Ms. Johnson meditates daily here, sitting on the cushion she stores beneath the living room sofa, where the cat sleeps ("stray cats target Buddhist households," she said).

Written in longhand over 13 years, the book, her first, published by Bantam, hints at but does not fully reveal Ms. Johnson's own circuitous path. She and Mr. Rudnick have lived "off campus" since 1998, when she inherited enough money to "move out into the world," she said. Though she lives "one rung out" from the farm, as she puts it, she continues to teach gardening and meditation and serves as a mentor to young apprentices. She shares her home with her husband and their friend Mayumi Oda, a Zen silk screen artist, who also spends time in Hawaii.

The decor of her home is a heady mix of votive-lit Buddhist altars and moon calendars combined with schoolmarmish English teacups and other heirlooms from her grandmother's house on Mirror Lake in Lake Placid. She grew up in Westport, Conn., the daughter of an independently wealthy, politically involved theater producer and a "wild gambler" mother who spent much of her time in Manhattan teaching bridge at

the Regency Club and gambling at the Cavendish Club. (On Fridays she would say, “See you Monday”).

She and her sisters, Deborah, a New York fashion designer, and Sally, an actress in Los Angeles, were raised with a French governess they called Nanny (yes, “Eloise” was her favorite book).

Her parents divorced when Ms. Johnson was 13, and she divided her time between Westport and Manhattan, where her father “kept clothes so we could go to the theater,” including a turquoise and gray houndstooth suit with patent leather shoes. Both parents have died, but she remains close to her stepmother, Sandy Johnson, the author of “The Book of Tibetan Elders.”

A photograph of her in a satin dress on her 10th birthday at Sardi’s hangs on the wall. “I remember my father telling me, ‘I have the best present for you,’ ” she said. “I thought it was a horse. Instead, it was tickets to the New York Yankees.”

Her father told her it was “really not conscionable” to go to college — she should be out protesting. But Ms. Johnson eventually wound up at Pomona. Like many young seekers, she responded to the tumult of the Vietnam era by fleeing, spending her junior year in Israel, where, in 1972, she met her first “root teacher,” Soen Nakagawa Roshi. A year later, she arrived at the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center near Big Sur, where people walked around in black robes chanting in Japanese. “I felt I was making the most relevant decision,” she said, “because the world didn’t make sense to me.”

A fellow pilgrim was Annie Somerville, now the executive chef of Greens, with whom Ms. Johnson frequently collaborates on the “eating-garden relationship,” including the cookbook “Fields of Greens” (Ms. Johnson is also an adviser to the Chez Panisse Foundation’s Edible Schoolyard project at the [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) Middle School in Berkeley). At Tassajara, Ms. Somerville recalled, Ms. Johnson insisted on planting comfrey, “a deeply mucilaginous plant with furry leaves that helps coagulate blood and tastes absolutely revolting.”

Ms. Johnson said: “There was a lot of sitting, chanting and meditating. The garden kept me sane.”

She felt profoundly disoriented upon leaving Tassajara, with its dry porous soil, for foggy Green Gulch, where she and Mr. Rudnick would get married and eventually plant their children’s placentas beneath a now-flourishing crabapple tree. Her homesickness was lessened only when she stumbled upon a huge wild red rose growing on a crest of the headlands, perhaps left by a long-gone rancher, a “north star” plant that emotionally anchored her by reminding her that she was on well-loved land.

She takes stock of such touchstones, finding Zen perspectives even in compost. On a cold and windy New Year’s Eve last year, she and Mr. Rudnick headed out to the compost heap with five shopping bags full of outtakes from her book, “much of it purple prose,” she said.

She placed the discarded manuscripts on the pile, covering them with old weeds, hot manure and newly pulled poison hemlock to help them decompose. She put another batch of prose and weeds into a 55-gallon drum. Then, with lovingkindness toward herself, she lit it all.

“It was hugely satisfying,” she said.

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