

Tilling the Soil

By Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB

"It takes time and devotion to learn the language of color and lighting in the garden. Your tastes are sure to change over time, reflecting your inner evolution. Seeing the garden as a canvas for your celebration of Nature's palette is a wonderful expression of the soul's love of beauty and artistry. Your own inner intuition, however, is often your best teacher, but don't forget that Mother Nature will always have a few surprises up Her sleeve as well. Perhaps your greatest insight will be that this glorious exploration of light and color and their interrelationship is really meant to illuminate the many facets of your being and personality."

- *Christopher and Tricia McDowell, The Sanctuary Garden*

I've been enjoying the coming of the central California spring: alternating days that push temperatures into the 70s and beyond with days characterized by rain squalls dropping ice water. The daffodils started blooming early with their displays of gold and white, and trees have put forth their yearly show of pink and white blossoms. The hills, which turn golden brown in summer, are now verdant green and in places interlaced with yellow mustard. As I run with friends at noon, golden-orange poppies grace the fields and the redwing blackbirds remind us with song and swoop that we are merely visitors in a territory to which they have long ago laid claim.

These features of spring also bring me back to the days in which I was a dues-paying member of a garden club. There are lessons learned in the endeavors and rewards of gardening that long reside within the memories of our bodies and souls, forming a metaphorical guidebook for our endeavors in general. These lessons apply as well to the learning and practicing of the art and business of massage as to the tilling of the soil. A successful practice, like as garden, is not made by sitting in the shade and saying "Oh how lovely"; it requires planning and effort.

Among the first decisions in planning a garden are the choices of place and structure. What is the goal? There are plants that thrive in full sunlight and plants that require shade. There are aquatic plants that must have their feet wet, and others that will rot and die if overwatered. Choices of structure and place, once made, hold for a while, like the garden plot along a chain link fence a friend chose to support her raspberries. In choosing training and locations for massage practice, consider whether you are aiming towards relaxation and stress management, sports facilitation, or therapeutic intervention. Do you want to do orthopedic work on injuries, lend comfort to the bodily strains of pregnant women, or add touch to the lives of the aged? Do you want to run a one-person business, share a practice with others, or work within a larger organization such as a health club or spa?

Just as a gardener will consult books and landscaping experts in laying out a new back yard, tie yourself in to available resources in doing your practice plans and business goals. The Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), for example, provides both e-mail counseling and offers local workshops through its chapters. I maintain a list of links to SCORE and other small business resources on the McKinnon Institute website.¹

In gardening, once the site is chosen, the work of soil preparation begins. Around here, the soil is heavy clay. To grow anything other than deep-rooted weeds requires a lot of shovel work, breaking through the hard crust, turning over the soil, and mixing in lots of organic compost. It's said that "if you double your initial estimate for bags of mulch and add three you'll only end up two bags short." Similarly, creating an office space that will be of comfort to you and your clients requires some thought, work, and final adjustments. It will likely be more work than you anticipated. If you are opening your own office, there are choices to make of wall color and decor, floor surface, furniture, clothing, and massage equipment and supplies. You might find yourself doing some cleaning and painting. Even working in an existing context, some of the choices remain. Depending on your opportunities, you also may find yourself wanting to add some "just in time" learning to reinforce your knowledge and skills in a particular area.

Once the soil preparation is done, the tasks of planting and tending begin. In the practice of massage, there are tasks of networking, marketing, record keeping, and beginning to tend to the needs of clients. Here you start needing the full combination of massage skills, communication skills, and business savvy to grow your practice - a combination that Claude Whitmyer and Salli Rasberry lump together in the single coined word "tradeskill."² They note 10 characteristic traits that they have identified in those who have the knack of making small businesses succeed: being persistent; facing the facts; minimizing risks; being a hands-on

learner; being good with numbers; being organized; being able to read carefully; possessing self-starting energy; relying on cooperation; and being consistent in behavior. Over time, you'll begin to discover what efforts and clients are working for you, and begin to thin and weed the rest.

Finally, with the hard work done, there comes the time for harvesting, enjoying and sharing the fruits of your labor. There is a deep satisfaction in seeing what you have started from seed become substantial. There are also important opportunities to network with colleagues and to mentor those learning the way after you. I encourage you to take full advantage of these fruits of your "soil tilling".

A woman dreamed she walked into a brand-new shop in the marketplace and, to her surprise, found God behind the counter. "What do you sell here?" she asked. "Everything you heart desires," said God. Hardly daring to believe what she was hearing, the woman decided to ask for the best things a human being could wish for. "I want peace of mind and love and happiness and wisdom and freedom from fear," she said. Then as an afterthought, she added, "Not just for me. For everyone on earth." God smiled, "I think you've got me wrong, my dear," He said. "We don't sell fruits here. Only seeds."

- *Anthony de Mello, Taking Flight*

References

1. McKinnon Institute - list of small business resources:
www.mckinnonmassage.com/links.html#Business.
 2. Claude Whitmyer and Salli Rasberry, 1994: *Running a One-Person Business*, 2nd ed., Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA. ISBN 0-89815-598-3.
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