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# Warm and Fuzzy Garden Communication

*OK, maybe it's not. But at least you'll be protected legally!* By John Hershey



ardening may seem like a solitary hobby, but it actually requires good communication skills. And I don't mean Prince Charles's famous advice that "to get the best results, you must talk to your vegetables." I'm talking about interacting with real people, not plants or royalty.

I faced a garden communication challenge this year, when I planted pole beans along a chain-link fence at the edge of my community garden plot. The plants grew so that the leaves are on the inside, but all the beans hang on the outside of the fence, right by the busy city sidewalk. As my vines began producing succulent foot-long beans, I began worrying that passersby would be tempted to snack on them.

I needed a strategy to convey a welcoming message to our neighbors, letting them know I appreciate their interest in the community garden, while politely discouraging them from helping themselves to our vegetables. Calling upon all my gardening experience and communication skills, I hung a big sign on the fence:

**WARNING: Ornamental beans.  
Not to be taken internally.  
Harmful or fatal if swallowed.**

It's like criminal defense work: All I have to do is plant a reasonable doubt in the minds of the pedestrians.

Of course, sometimes we *do* want to share our garden's bounty with friends and family. This requires effective communication,

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too. When I give away fresh veggies, I like to include a friendly greeting that provides helpful information about using the produce—without detracting from its attractive appearance. This was a challenge, but again I came up with an appropriate solution. I unobtrusively affix a bright yellow sticker to each tomato and cucumber with this message:

This garden vegetable (hereinafter the ‘produce’) is provided AS IS, with no guarantees or warranties whatsoever, including any implied warranty of edibility. The consumer assumes all risks of eating or other use of the produce, including the risk of serious illness or death. To the extent permitted by applicable law, the gardener disclaims all liability for defects in the produce, including, but not limited to, inherent defects in the variety or hybrid and defects caused by improper care, incompetence, or any other act or omission of the gardener.

Did I mention that I’m a lawyer as well as a gardener?

You may find my approach to garden communication slightly legalistic. That's fine. Everyone has his own style. Perhaps you even thought such an ennobling activity as gardening would make an aggressive attorney more mellow and generous. Hey, I work hard in my garden. I'm just using good communication to protect my crop and avoid potential liability.

Communication is also about focusing attention on the positive aspects of a situation. Some call this "spin."

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I call it staying on message. For example, gardeners give away food that we've grown for two basic reasons. The official reason is that we're proud of the veggies we've grown, and it's satisfying to share this nutritious food with people we care about. The real reason is that handing out our overabundance of squash and kale is a desperate defense

mechanism, the last resort before we have to throw them in the compost pile.

The goal here is to downplay the second reason. It doesn't exactly make the recipient feel special. Being aware of the messages we send when sharing food from our garden can help ensure that both parties are happy with the transaction. Here are some practical garden communication tips:

**1) Try to convey the idea that receiving fresh garden produce is a good thing, not a burden.**

It's hard not to come across as a control freak. Most people like to choose their own diets, and here I am forcing my tomatillos and butternut squash on them. What if they're on some sort of faddish North Shore Diet that forbids them to eat fresh vegetables? Some people are strict vegetarians. They might be offended if a hunter dropped off a big chunk of venison. Similarly, one of my brothers-in-law is a strict carnivore. He doesn't eat anything unless it contains meat. Giving him a basket of lettuce as a gift would be just as insensitive.

But we don't stop at dictating the menu. When we give someone a bunch of raw vegetables from our garden, we are creating work

for them. We are saying, in effect, “Here, wash these vegetables, find an appropriate recipe, obtain all the other ingredients, and laboriously prepare a meal. You’re welcome!” For someone whose normal dinner routine involves pushing the China Kitchen button on the speed dial, this may not seem like such a generous gift.

**2) Be realistic about the value of the food you grow.**

Economists tell us that scarcity is what creates value. This time of year, our zucchinis are much less scarce than are people willing to take them. So, technically, they have little value.

This can cause feelings of resentment when people don’t take full advantage of our gifts. Not long ago I delivered a big bowl of juicy cherry tomatoes to certain people, whom I won’t name to protect their privacy. When I visited again a week later, a few had been used in salads, but most of the tomatoes sat rotting on the counter. “C’mon, Mom and Dad,” I whined. “Why aren’t you eating this stuff?” To avoid such family tensions, remember that no matter how delicious your cherry tomatoes are, it’s not easy to sit down and eat 2 quarts of them.

Ultimately, you must realize that your garden produce is just not as important to the recipient as it is to you. To you, it’s the sacred product of all your hours of work and accumulated horticultural knowledge, a living manifestation of your deeply personal place in the great web of connections to the natural world. To them, it’s a green bean.

Speaking of which, I now have so many beans hanging on the chain-link fence that I can’t possibly harvest and use them all. So I’ve changed the sign to this:

**WELCOME! Please help yourself to some delicious green beans!**

Wow, I guess gardening has made me a better person after all!

But, hey, I’m still not responsible if some freeloader chokes on a bean. ❖

