

welcome

Growing Miracles Fast



I read recently that the man who invented Miracle-Gro had passed away. The headline of the obituary caught my eye because I hadn't realized that someone invented Miracle-Gro. Somehow I thought it was one of those products cooked up by anonymous scientists in a lab and foisted on unwitting gardeners who didn't know they wanted bigger tomatoes faster. But no. Horace Hagedorn was the genius behind a product he developed and his wife named—heralding an era during which letters continue to drop gracelessly to the floor (“thru”; “tho”; “r”; “nu”).

That green and yellow box has been in my life as long as I've been gardening. I remember buying my first fix as a teenager obsessed with houseplants. (This is what happens when junior high goes wrong.) I must have had 60 or 70 little potted plants in my bedroom, and I watered, tended, nipped, fed, pruned, and coddled them with the devotion of a new mother. But like all besotted parents, I worried that I wasn't doing enough for my offspring. Needless to say, I didn't have a lot of cohorts in the houseplant department; it was hard to find anyone who could teach me how to take care of them. Macramé classes, to make clever little baskets in which to hang plants? No problem. Bread baking courses? I skipped school a morning a week for a couple of months to learn how to make whole wheat bread—and I got credit for it. Pottery classes were plentiful; it was considered radical—and liberating—to regress to an era when women not only spent all day preparing health food, but spent most of the night preparing the vessels for cooking and serving as well.

One day the local florist who supplied me with plants gave me a box of Miracle-Gro. I followed the instructions, carefully spooning the green granules into my watering can, and poured the mixture around my plants. The results, overnight, were thrilling. Suddenly I was tending a crop of rambunctious teenagers; plants were hurling themselves up out of their pots, draping their lanky, petulant selves off my shelves, sending out sprays of flowers in vibrant hues I'd never before seen. I was repotting faster than the kilns could cook new sizes. All this activity made me feel intensely powerful, and as I spritzed cool water over my brood I glowed with matronly pride. I was all green thumbs.

And then came the terrible days when I learned that a gardener pays a price for taking a short cut around Mother Nature. My plants seemed to be going through their life cycles at five times the normal clip, which meant that shortly after their spectacular bursts of growth, they were becoming languid, exhausted; their heavy heads were drooping sadly. They seemed to be skipping maturity and heading right into mortality. It was as if I had asked

them to live many seasons in one—to dazzling effect, with horrendous consequence. They were devastated, and so was I. It was too many years ago for me to remember now if I had somehow tampered with the magic formula, thinking if one tablespoon is good, two must be better. Or perhaps I had miscalculated the proportions going from gallons to quarts, math not having been my strong suit. Perhaps I was just doing exactly the sort of thinking that leads baseball players to steroids.

Or maybe I was just learning about the problem with forcing miracles. Fertilizers were on my mind, and in the air, when I was last in London attending the Chelsea Flower Show. You want to talk about obsessive gardeners? That's the place to start. An enormous tent is filled with stands of flowers and vegetables. Each one is presided over by a fierce gardener; each one is meant to show both audience and judges that theirs are the tallest, bluest delphiniums, or the largest, reddest strawberries. And yes, there were dahlias the size of dinner plates. As we used to say, what a trip, and I do mean in the hallucinogenic sense. I had never seen such perfectly raised, perfectly groomed specimens. I could hardly believe the fruits and flowers were real and had to resist the urge to pinch or poke.

This, of course, is what your average supermarket looks like these days. Most people won't buy apples that aren't perfectly red, round, and shiny, unless they are perfectly green, round, and shiny. The organic stuff comes with bumps and spots, just like we're supposed to (and used to). But take a bite into an organic apple and then into the other kind, and you tell me, which one is the miracle? Granted, there's nothing insidious about Miracle-Gro; it isn't a feat of genetic engineering. It is just good old-fashioned fertilizer, in highly concentrated form. It is also just good old-fashioned temptation—if you push a little harder, feed a little more, you can get the biggest tomato the world has ever seen. And you can get it fast. It seems a cruel promise, when you think what such temptation costs us. Once

you've seen a dahlia the size of a dinner plate in your garden, nothing else looks quite right. Once your tomatoes could be mistaken for soccer balls, all others look deflated. And once you've pushed your plants so hard, that's it; they're spent. But the tomatoes always get the last laugh. No matter how much he used it, Miracle-Gro never worked miracles on Mr. Hagedorn's own tomatoes. May he rest in peace, and may your garden do the same.

