Late last summer, I moved from Zone 5 to Zone 9, or, to be both more and (at least to a gardener) less geographically precise, from southern New England to Northern California. We gardeners divide the world into zones of plant hardiness; the lower the number, the colder it gets; so to go from Zone 5, with winter lows reaching 20 below, to Zone 9, where it barely freezes, is, horticulturally speaking, tantamount to a change of planet. I've been gardening seriously for 25 years and have learned all sorts of things, yet I feel as if I now have to start from zero.

Oh, sure, there are plenty of more notable culture shocks that register on moving from New England to California. Drivers here switch lanes on a whim, their faith in telepathy evidently eliminating the need to signal their intentions. Compared with New Englanders, Californians are almost ridiculously friendly—friendly enough to put a Connecticut Yankee (O.K., a Connecticut Jewish Yankee) on his guard. People you've just met are constantly proposing you go with them on a camping trip to "the Sierra," as if spending a weekend in a tent with strangers were a reasonable way to break the social ice. The first time I picked my son Isaac up after a play date here in Berkeley, his new pal's mom invited me over for "a tub" just as casually as someone back in Cornwall might have asked me to tea after we'd exchanged greetings at the general store for, oh, maybe a decade or two.

These sorts of cultural differences I'm finding I can get used to; California is remarkably soft and hospitable ground in which to reroot, no doubt because the state has welcomed so many transplants over the years. It's the horticultural changes I'm having trouble with. Everyone tells me how easy it is to garden in California, and it's true there is almost nothing that won't grow here, assuming you can figure out how to program the irrigation computer in the basement. Yet for me, having worked so hard for so long to become fluent in the plants and land and weather of northwestern Connecticut, gardening in California feels like writing in a second language. I can do it, sort of, manage to make myself understood, but everything feels (and, I'm afraid, probably looks) stilted, the handiwork of someone still consulting the printed instructions; what once was second nature is now strained.

You want to know what I really miss? Friends, family, fall color, first snow, sure, and pretty much as I expected. But the thing I didn't count on missing quite as sharply as I do is my garden at this time of year, when the spring rains and strengthening sun are raising some new astonishment from the formerly dead earth virtually every week. April's shocks of forsythia give way to May's soft apple blossoms, the apple blossoms to the lilac (one plant that won't reliably flower here; it wants a good stiff winter), the captivating lilac to the summery rose. And then, running in parallel, the ritual sequence of bulbs: April's crocus and narcissus yielding to May's tulips, the tulips to summer's alliums. The order of bloom is so dependable and familiar that even from this distance I can picture spring unfurling in my garden as if in time-lapse. But though the sequence is as fixed as physical law, exactly which week it kicks off in any given year depends on just how deeply
winter's frost has penetrated the ground, and this year, for the first time in ages, I have no idea.

I get news from my garden in unsatisfying dribs and drabs. Our tenants don't garden, so I hired a local gardener named Chuck Birge to look after things, and he will let me know what made it through the winter and what did not. We New England gardeners have to tally our dead each April, and this spring the casualties promise to be high. A string of mild winters accompanied by long-term predictions of global warming led many of us in Zone 5 to begin pushing the envelope. So a few years ago, figuring I might as well make the most of a warming world, I planted a Franklinia, a handsome specimen tree I'd always admired but really isn't cut out for life in Zone 5. As you may know better than I, the New England winter reverted to classic form this year—and any day now I'm betting Chuck will report that my young tree didn't make it. I can't help thinking that, had I been around, I would have wrapped the burlap around its trunk a little more snugly, perhaps have nursed it through those lethal January nights.

It's going to sound funny, but I do feel as if, by moving away, I've somehow let my garden down. Can you feel guilt toward a place or a plant? I'll admit I sometimes do. A garden is a kind of bargain struck between the gardener and the land, and it survives only as long as both parties do their parts to keep it up. This rocky hillside in Connecticut would be an entirely different landscape if not for my gardening of it. Indeed, on the evidence of what we found when we bought it in 1983, the land had its own plans, and they did not include people, much less gardens.

What had been a working dairy farm until 1966 (going by the feed-store calendar nailed to the crumbling milk house door) was by 1983 rapidly reverting to second-growth forest. The ashes, oaks and chokecherries had marched down the hillside, conquered most of the cow pastures and were threatening the little frame house, which we found cowering behind its narrow moat of lawn, defended weekly by the previous owner's screaming Toro. The next 20 years consisted of a protracted series of negotiations with the imperial forest that resulted in new ponds, a fenced-in vegetable garden, various new shrubs and trees and a long border of perennials fronting a fieldstone wall that, each morning, conducted me down a path into the woods, where I had built a little studio to work in.

I think of the garden as a negotiation because, as I learned early on, any attempt to unilaterally impose terms on the New England landscape is doomed. That lesson sometimes proved expensive, as when I dug a pond in a place where water simply didn't want to be. My imported notions of the picturesque—I was determined to look out at a pond from my desk—were no match for the water's equally determined intentions, which were basically to be somewhere else entirely from around Memorial Day till Thanksgiving. After several summers spent gazing out at a gaping 12-foot-deep crater, I began to understand where the local water really wanted to collect, and did something I had not realized you could do: I moved my pond, much to the satisfaction of both gardener and ground water (and excavator).
But most of my negotiations with the land involved more prosaic matters—finding the happiest spot for a tree peony, or the right shrub for a boggy depression—and were conducted by hand rather than by heavy equipment. I would never claim to have a green thumb, but over time I did manage to acquire some measure of the botanical empathy that I've always thought distinguishes the green thumb from the rest of us: the helpful ability, I mean, to see matters from a plant's point of view (where it wants to be; what it needs to thrive), or, as a pond consultant once advised me, to "think like water."

By the time we decamped for California, I felt as if I was on pretty good terms with my little patch of New England. Sure, there was still the occasional skirmish with the forest (representatives of which abducted three of my chickens last spring), but on the whole, relations between me and the species I shared this land with had attained a mutually agreeable state of equipoise. That balance of forces is never more than tenuous, however, for without the gardener's continual interventions, the forest will resume its march down the hill, rout the perennials, topple the walls and eventually erase the garden from the landscape. In my absence, Chuck's job is to deploy clippers, pruning shears, mowers and weed-whackers to keep that from happening. As for me, 3,000 miles away, a lot of my "gardening" these days consists of phone calls, e-mail and the crossing of fingers.

"Consult the genius of the place in all," Alexander Pope famously counseled the gardener, yet most of us quickly realize this is much easier said than done. Perhaps because this particular "genius" (by which Pope of course meant spirit) speaks so obliquely and frames so much of what it has to say in the negative—in the form, I mean, of a dead tree or a water-free pond—it has taken me the better part of a quarter-century to even begin to comprehend everything it was trying to tell me. Now I needed to learn the language of a completely different genius, acquire its alien idioms of soil and light and rain. How would a Queen of Night tulip, my favorite, look in the high-contrast sparkle of Bay Area light? (Spectacular, it would turn out.) What must a carrot feel like, pushing through Berkeley clay? (Utterly defeated.) What taste will that soil impart to the lettuces I like to grow? (Minerals.) As a way of coming to know the genius of a place, gardening is nothing if not pragmatic: the important truths are all local and founded on no principle but what works and what doesn't.

There are no shortcuts through the vale of trial and error, and the journey is bound to leave its mark on the gardener as much as on the place. I sometimes think that consulting this phlegmatic genius, learning his tricky New England dialect, has been my principal work these past few years, that and writing about the process. I've written three books that, in one way or another, take place in my Cornwall garden, and it was there ("there"!—I'm so much more accustomed to typing "here") that I found my voice as a writer. By now some not-small part of my identity is tied up with that place or, rather, with the making of that place, which is not at all the same thing. I am more of a gardener than I am a New Englander. And yet learning to garden in New England, in a place where the revanchist forest and Zone 5 winter lows shadow your every move, has no doubt colored how I look at things, given me a sense of place I would not describe as relaxed.
Compared with California, compared with just about anywhere, New England is notoriously difficult ground in which to put down roots. Thoreau would probably say the stony, stingy soils have had a deforming effect on the local temperament, and he'd probably be right. Certainly we found that it takes a lot more than a closing to attach a newcomer to a parcel of New England real estate. A quarter-century after we moved to Cornwall, people in town were still referring to our house by the previous owner's name. Particularly since he had lived in the house for no more than a couple of years, this really used to bug me—until I bumped into him and he mentioned that no one had ever called it his place until he sold it to us. "The whole time I lived there, it was always Joe Matyas's old place," he said. "Used to bug the hell out of me." Apparently you have to move away or die before anyone in small-town New England is prepared to completely acknowledge your presence.

Maybe now that we're gone, our neighbors have begun to call the property on Flat Rocks Road "the old Pollan place." (Yikes!—feels like reading your own obituary.) For me, a guy from New York moving to a town whose older families have been around since it was incorporated in 1740, "belonging" in Cornwall has been as much a matter of forming an attachment to its land as to its people, if not more. John Locke thought that the concept of private property originated in the mixing of one's labor with nature. Whatever you think of the political implications of that idea, surely it contains a kernel of emotional truth. For me, at least, some such mixing of self and land, and not merely a deed of ownership, is ultimately what makes a place your own. By cultivating this land so intensively, by building and digging and planting trees, some of what I am has become part of what this place is and (unless Chuck really drops the ball) what it will remain.

As you can imagine, the idea of ever "selling" such a place was out of the question, even when an interesting opportunity lured us West. But holding onto Cornwall meant we couldn't afford to buy a house in California, so we're renting, an existential condition that complicates a gardener's life. Yet if what I wrote in the previous paragraph is really true (and to be honest, I'm not yet sure), the lack of a deed shouldn't keep me from making this new place, at least in some spiritual sense, my own. Certainly the owners are not standing in my way. Operating under the dubious assumption I would be able to transfer whatever horticultural skills I possess to California as readily as my driver's license, the people we're renting from have pretty much given us carte blanche to make changes in their yard; in fact, they offered us a break on the rent in exchange for working on the garden. I just hope they won't be too disappointed.

It's a good thing that states don't license gardeners the way they do drivers, because if I had to take a written test to requalify as a gardener in the state of California, I would definitely have failed. What month should you plant tulips? What's the name of the tree with fruits that resemble miniature pumpkins? Will basil survive the winter outdoors? Should you stake an artichoke? Is Mexican salvia an annual or a perennial? So little of what I brought with me as a gardener seems to apply. I'd be lucky to get my learner's permit.
So I'm beginning slowly, observing more than planting, taking the time to learn the names of so many unfamiliar plants, and to dope out the sequence of the seasons. Contrary to what you hear, there are seasons in California; they're just all messed up. A subjective judgment, you think? Well, consider this bit of perversity: In December, just as the deciduous trees finally drop their leaves, the grasses, after lying dormant and dun-colored for months, suddenly wake up and turn green. Without a real winter to keep them apart, spring and fall trip over each other coming and going. And when exactly does spring start around here, anyway? Since the sequence of bloom never really ends, can it be said to ever begin? I still haven't figured out whether to regard the camellias, which began blooming in December and are still pumping out their dowager blossoms in May, as last fall's last flowers or this spring's first.

So, heeding Pope, I've set about consulting the new resident genius of the place, and I'm beginning to pick up a smattering of the local dialect. Like the fact that the unfolding of the horticultural year follows the rhythms of the rains rather than the temperature or even the length of the day. O.K., pretty basic, but this explains why even the most experienced gardeners I consulted usually shrugged when I asked them what hardiness zone we lived in; the crucial designation that explained everything in New England—from the list of what could be grown to when the forsythia fountained and the maples flared—doesn't much matter in California. Water matters.

And the water thinks differently out here. For one thing, it comes all at once, crowding a whole year's worth of rainfall into three months of complete overkill. Every drop after that is paid for and comes by way of a black plastic tube. This is what it means to garden in a Mediterranean climate, which is, instead of hardiness zone, the crucial horticultural designation hereabouts. I learned there are five such Mediterranean zones around the world (the Mediterranean itself, parts of South Africa and Chile, southern Australia and coastal California), places where the flora evolved to make the most of a mild, rainy winter and then withstand a long dry summer. Not surprisingly, plants from all five regions feel perfectly at home in Northern California. But then so do species from the desert and, with irrigation, plants from northern-temperate places like New England, Japan and China. Everybody's here.

Depending on what you're used to, the results are gardens of astounding diversity or dissonance. I'm sorry, but it still rubs me the wrong way to see cacti cohabitating with pine trees, pines with palms, palms with azaleas, azaleas with aloes, aloes with tulips. It's a very urban idea, this sort of botanical cosmopolitanism, and maybe it'll grow on me. But when you can do just about anything you want in the garden, it's hard to know what you want to do. So here I find myself, a somewhat pinched New England gardener at sea in an excess of California possibility.

Part of grokking the genius of the place is acquiring a sense of what it wants to be in your absence: what "lapsed" looks like in your garden. I know for a fact that five years of neglect in Cornwall would doom most everything I've planted there and usher the forest right onto the porch. Here? Well I'm not entirely sure yet, but the abandoned gardens I see around don't seem to revert to anything pre-existing; there's no forest on the other side
of the gate nursing its resentments. Rather, it's the garden plants themselves that run riot when the gardener dozes, the passion vine spreading out to smother the porch, the wisteria clambering over and yanking down the arbor. In California it's not the forest's avant-garde of shrubby weeds that needs to be restrained, but the stuff we plant ourselves, which is why I find I now spend less time encouraging and defending my perennials than checking their rampancy—weeding less and hacking more. I can see why the local nurseries carry machetes.

So far, though, the main focus of my gardening has been the relatively manageable little patch of edible things I put in by the back deck. Growing vegetables has always seemed to me the elemental act of gardening—sowing a few seeds in the spring so as by summer to harvest something good to eat from your land. This at least had been my way into the garden as a child, and it felt like the right way to re-enter it here. Isn't this what new arrivals have always done? The immigrant's garden is a place in which to recreate something of home on foreign ground, to see the plants you know best put down new roots and, with any luck, thrive in this strange soil. (Talk about botanical empathy!) The initial impulse may be a reactionary one, but not necessarily, I discovered, the result.

Two tremendous trees dominate my new backyard, a cedar and a redwood, and the only spot sunny enough for vegetables was a semicircular bed already planted with bulbs and perennials. So first I had to convince my landlord that this was a mistake. After she signed off on my plan, I moved her perennials, dug in some compost and planted a handful of the sorts of vegetables I've always had in my garden: broccoli, kale and chard, several different kinds of lettuce, a handful of strawberries and some kitchen herbs. The only thing that felt weird about any of this was that I was doing it in November—these are cool-weather crops I would never put out in Connecticut before April. But, hey, this is California. And because it is California, because I really am hoping to assimilate horticulturally, I made some room in my new garden for a pair of dwarf citrus trees (a kumquat and a Meyer lemon) and the spiky bluish seedling of an artichoke.

For most of the quote-unquote winter, I had to push myself to get out into the garden. Old habits of hibernation die hard, and the prospect of weeding around Christmastime or the Super Bowl held no appeal whatsoever. But that was O.K., because during those short days things grew at a snail's pace. (Everything, that is, except the snails themselves, who crisscrossed the garden on their slime tracks with impunity until I threw down some diatomaceous earth.) In March, as the rains subsided and the days got longer, life in the garden quickened considerably. We began harvesting an impressive amount of food (for March anyway), including some gorgeous heads of butter lettuce, nice bunches of red chard and rocket and a couple of tasty heads of broccoli. My kumquat is about to bear its first little fruit, and the Meyer lemon is covered in richly scented blossoms. Now, by local standards none of this qualifies as a horticultural achievement; indeed, you probably couldn't stop these things from growing if you tried. Even so, I'm feeling kind of impressed with myself.

But what I'm most impressed with is my artichoke, a plant I tried to grow in Connecticut with no success. Artichokes won't flower until they've been through a winter; the problem
is, they can't withstand a Zone 5 winter. Supposedly you can trick them into thinking they've experienced a winter by planting them early in the spring and protecting them from hard frost, but I never managed to fool one in Connecticut.

Here in California, I didn't have to try. Straight through the quote-unquote winter, my artichoke grew and grew, tossing off one toothy glaucous leaf after another, the leaves getting steadily larger and more leathery until the plant was the biggest, most riveting presence in the garden, a shrubby thistle that, if you squinted, resembled a great shaggy dog. And then a few weeks ago it threw its first flower: an arm like a monster stalk of celery thrust straight up into the air, culminating in a clenched green fist. There was nothing reactionary about this immigrant's garden now. No longer a memorial to some zone a world away, the garden looked as if it belonged here, and maybe (just maybe), so did I.

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