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garden tips

Artichokes and Armadillos

by

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Lucas
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Editor's note: The time is upon us to start fighting the yard game again. This can be taken as a how-to or how-not-to piece.

ILLUSTRATION BY DONNA AND KEVIN HILL



Getting and keeping a good yard man throughout a season abounds with uncertainties. I felt fortunate this spring when a temperamental fellow who tends most of the yards along my street accepted my patches of bermuda with their many obstacles.

However, at any time he could throw up his hands in exasperation and never return. Already he has balked on eight of his twenty lawns. Mine may be next, and then who knows where to find another to take his place.

Yard men refuse lawns for ridiculous excuses, and my grounds flourish with serious offenses. Four o'clocks drape beyond their beds with rocks underlying the droop. Limitless English ivy intertwine trumpet vines, and artichokes bow with exhaustion from over-stimulated growth.

Then frequent rains brought another serious offender. Strange holes with little tufts of grass and dirt around them grew overnight all over my back yard. Thinking of aggressive robins and grackles, I disregarded any thoughts of major blight.

While mowing one humid, hot morning, the yard man stopped for a rest and drawled, "Lady, you got armadillos."

My only experience with armadillos and armadillo holes was back in the days when I hauled round bales of alfalfa hay on the farm. Sometimes my pickup truck and transporter wheels disappeared into unknown depths. I learned to keep a shovel handy. Those soft mounds of dirt signaled either an underhanded job or a detour.

Even though this city armadillo seemed a dainty eater, it could be reason for losing a good yard man. After his complaint, next dawn I began hunting for the creature. I had no idea what to do if I found it. Maybe catch and take it to a country home.

My search began on the shady side of my house under the artichokes. They were six feet tall, healthy, thick, and succulent. While I was crawling around and probing under them, a sophisticated neighbor strolled by, taking her morning walk. She is one of those lovely elderly people who always have lovelier yards.

Since we first met years ago, I have felt a complex coming on every time we visit. Her yard is perfectly manicured, and mine is filled with procrastination. I always find more important things to do than pull weeds and snip vines.

I explained to her, "I'm trying to find my armadillo. He might be resting in these artichokes."

Being both petite and polite, she gazed up at the gallant growth. She whispered, "Oh? Those are artichokes?" She turned toward me and stared in a peculiar manner. The armadillo appeared not to worry her at all.

I wanted to tell her the armadillo might get into her yard, and she would have no one to mow her lawn either. But of course the armored thing would not dare. She probably had few worms and insects anyway.

I explained to her that artichokes are considered a valuable source of levulose sugars which diabetic persons can safely eat. No one in my family has diabetes, but artichoke tubers are a tasty potato substitute. Best of all, they make excellent shade for the sunny side of a home.

It was my big-city son who told me of artichokes. The Jerusalem variety is related to sunflowers and is recommended as nutritious cattle feed. My son knows all about them and grows them profusely, too. He started his with tubers from an exclusive garden shop.

No telling where mine came from. They have always been part of the wildlife in my yard. The 30-foot wall of exotic plants with their yellow blossoms is something to behold. Truthfully, my son said they look like Jerusalem artichokes.

With evasive looks, the neighbor left me crawling and probing with my yardstick. I continued searching through all the artichokes and then under four o'clocks, vines, and shrubs.

The day turned to gloom with no armadillos to be found. I had offended my best neighbor, and it was destiny to lose a yard man. No doubt, as that neighbor thought, the artichokes would turn out to be weeds and do nothing but choke my sewer line.