Nature abhors a garden. I wish I could remember who said that. It’s so true. Unless we tiptoed into the woods and built a cabin without touching the ground, most of us have a disturbed site. Upon it, we impose an artist’s conception of nature, which is not really a natural area at all. Rather, it is planted with species that may or may not have occurred naturally on that site, or occurred naturally with each other. The site will become a battleground, not a self-sustaining woods, and we will eventually need to intervene.

As soon as plants are put in the ground, the forces of entropy are unleashed. Exotic invasives (laurel, holly and Himalayan blackberry) and not-so-exotic invasives (grass, dandelions and shot weed) move in to take up residence. And then one discovers that even some of the chosen plants are way more prolific—even outright aggressive—compared
to others. Three, four and five plants will begin
to occupy the same space. Everything is every-
where! Furthermore, no matter who planted
it—the avid amateur, the native plant biologist
or the professional designer—in five or 10 years
the garden reveals itself to have been
overplanted. We are all driven to make it look
reasonably right at the beginning, only to find
that we have, yet again, underestimated the
mature size of shrubs or how many trees to
put together—and we foolishly thought the
day would never come when our mistakes
became apparent. But now the day is here.

I am frequently asked to renovate
overgrown gardens, especially and increas-
ingly, overgrown native-plant gardens. To bring
order out of chaos—and to do so in a way
that the garden will still appear natural, or
perhaps even a bit wild—is big fun and a real
challenge. For years I have enjoyed making
people’s woods prettier. But before I tackle
the area outside the front door, the owner

must first face The Unpleasant Truth: Pruning,
renovating and all gardening is an unnatural
act! The very principles of making a garden
look better are antithetical to what might be
considered the golden rule of nature—to
maximize diversity. In other words, nature,
especially in a disturbed area, loves a mess!
Birds and bugs and critters love a half-
uprooted, topped rotten tree, leaning on a
shrub that is full of dead wood, with broken,
brown fern fronds, surrounded by prickly
bushes impaling dead big leaf maple leaves
by the gobs. And your newts, lizards and
snakes wish you would leave a pile of rubble
and dried dead weeds in the back yard.

You may even have supplied the local
fauna with some of these messy areas on your
large property. But most folks want something
a little more pleasant at the front door. So I
try to mimic a more established ecology—
maybe not the lovely monoculture of the
climax forest, with a single sylvan grove and
a carpet of oxalis, but something more along the line of a shady forest floor at the Mt. Adams campground.

Renovating an overgrown, native-plant garden means separating layers, taking out some of the brown (dead stuff), reducing the number of plants occupying the same place, and deleting other plants completely just to make a nicer-looking garden. This is tough on some folks who will react according to deeply held subconscious beliefs, like:

Plants are either all good or all bad.

Natives are the good plants, and therefore all should live.

Natural means not interfering; I like the overgrown look.

A good pruner could just prune it back to the right sizes, and nothing would have to die.

But… actually… something will. Have to die, that is.

Remove Plants

Let’s start by killing the exotic woody invasives, shall we? Things like laurel, cotoneaster, holly and blackberry. Most people can agree on that. But this is not as easy as one would hope. If you cut them to the ground, they just grow back, with the possible exception of an old, woody scotch broom. A holly, for example, could easily outlive you, even if you cut it to the ground every other month for thirty years! Long after you’ve turned to dust, it will have sprung up to twenty feet and made a merry Christmas scene. Digging a plant up can be way, way more work than seems worthwhile, with plenty of destruction to nearby desirables, and it can turn up a host of weed seeds, too. But, then, aren’t such weeds just more native plants?

A saus-all and an eight-foot pry bar (which my husband calls the tool of ignorance—$8 to rent, $30 to buy) with a fulcrum might work, if it can be maneuvered into place. If you can spare $200, you can get yourself a weed wrench™. They’re cool. Ecological restoration workers use a $500 Round-Up (glyphosate) injection gun (JK Injections) system to apply concentrate to the freshly cut stems or to inject invasives such as Japanese knotweed. I use a 99-cent, touch-up, plastic paint canister with brush in lid and 9 percent glyphosate as a cut-stump treatment for any and all unwanted woody brush. (Apologies to my 100% organic friends.) More information on my method is available in the “Groundcovers: Ivy removal,” section of my book, “Cass Turnbull’s Guide to Pruning.”

So let it be a lesson to you new gardeners to patrol your garden every fall and pull these nuisances early on, when they are 1-2” tall and can be easily dispatched with a pair of pliers.

Next up, and a little harder for the native-plant novice, is removing the native invasives. Our native plants like it here. Some really like it here, and several are perfectly adapted to out-compete anything else you have on your property. Some are underground spreaders that are harder to stop than the
ones that just have babies all over the place. In either case, you are wise to remove some of these overly aggressive native plants. I’ve seen salmonberry invade and conquer mossy woods and open fields with amazing success! And remember that horsetail, fireweed and crows are native. Foxglove, cattails and red-winged blackbirds aren’t. It’s okay to hate a native plant on your property. You can ban it from your garden; but don’t worry, it is living happily someplace else nearby! In regular gardening parlance, the term *vigorous* is sometimes code for *invasive*. In restoration ecology, the term *very successful* can mean *invasive*. So listen closely to plant descriptions and choose wisely.

On the other hand, sometimes you *want* some thicket-producing natives, such as a mixed hedge of deciduous and evergreen shrubs like Oregon grape, ocean spray, red twig, hazelnut, currant and elderberry, to protect your forest edge from the invading non-natives. Or you may want a shorter, spreading thicket along your pasture fence (with plants such as snowberry and wild roses) that is kept from spreading by haying the field every year. But these same plants can run roughshod or overwhelm your front doorstep garden. You may care to remove just some or all of them, depending on the design and whether or not they are making themselves a nuisance. Sometimes the native garden has already become completely overwhelmed, and the only course left is to just surrender and pull out the losers—deleting, say, the huckleberry and sword ferns that have been totally submerged and overcome by the salal and oceanspray. Pretend you designed it that way.

In general, no more than two plants should occupy the same place. Pick two that look good together, or that offer high-low contrast, and edit out the others. A special case exists along the walkway, where the best choice is to have only low materials at the edge, with nothing too threatening or crowding at eye level. Now that we have removed unwanted woody plants by any means necessary, let’s proceed to the next job.

### De-vine and Get the Brown Out

Stringy groundcovers can muck up the good looks of a mixed planting. I often delete native vines, strawberry and ankle-busting wild blackberries, or restrict them to a dedicated area of their own.

And, even more unnaturally, I am apt to hand rake (or just push down) the worst of the brown leaves and other brown stuff (dog paddle out dead fern fronds and big leaf maple leaves caught up in the shrubs and make sure the curled brown leaves under the rhododendrons are raked out of sight). Tamp down or remove dead twigs and downed branchlets that fall from your conifer in every storm. Clean the path. The finer deciduous leaves get to stay, and areas farther from view can stay completely leafed and naturally mulched. To make up for the removal of debris, I sometimes have to reapply a mulch; arborist conifer chips most closely mimic the forest floor and work to suppress weeds. If you have your own chipper, you can feel good about the short recycle cycle you use by cleaning up and then mulching with the same, but now shredded, material.

When working my way through the landscape, I leave sword ferns in the right places as I consider them to be a near perfect plant for understory in native and non-native shade gardens. Sword ferns are great to use to complete designs that have been disrupted by removing large, unwanted woody plants. I love almost all the ferns, but the maidenhair and deer ferns are especially choice and fabulous to find in a garden. But, as anybody who has worked with me can tell you, I make war on lady ferns (*Athyrium*). In my view, they have too many babies that show up inside desirable shrubs, then die back and leave the shrubs stuffed with ugly, dead and broken brown fern fronds in the winter. I hate them. I use a baby
mattock to murder each and every one I can find, with a zeal that scares even me.

**Pruning**

I’ve noticed that there is just no guilt-free living anymore. When I was a kid, I ran the sink water as I brushed my teeth, we burned piles of autumn leaves and turned over rocks on the beach to molest the marine life. And, until recently, I used to say that deadwooding was always good and you couldn’t go wrong—that is until a lady told me she kept the dead twigs on her lilac that were the perfect size for some particular bird to build its nest. Drat! It’s true! Deadwood of all sorts is good for nature. Unfortunately, deadwood looks good pruned out of our trees and tree-like shrubs. Actually, it looks really good pruned out of everything. So carry on with the deadwooding, with the knowledge that there may be some places you will choose to leave it. Then properly dispose of your gardener’s guilt by composting it on the site with all the other aforementioned dead twigs, leaves and plants.

I have written extensively about how to prune plants according to one of three basic plant habits (cane-grower, tree-like and mounding-habit), and a link on PlantAmnesty’s website provides a valuable native plant list, with the plant size, relative aggressiveness and pruning habit of each, as well as the notations BBC (banned by Cass) and CPF (Cass’s personal favorite). (See www.plantamnesty.org) Pruning plants for size control is largely unsuccessful for all but the briefest time. Pruning to *referee* between plants, or to make individual plants look *more attractive*, are the real goals of pruning in landscape renovation.

I can think of three common scenarios. One is when two plants of equal size are too crowded. In this case, prune some of the branches of each that are headed into the other, and do a general thinning throughout as well. Now the shrubs mingle, like two
slow dancers, not barroom brawlers.

A second situation arises when two different-sized plants are too crowded. In this instance, prune off the lowest limbs of the tallest plant to accommodate the understory. For example, with a vine maple, remove its lowest limbs so the low mahonia planted under it can thrive.

Thirdly, pruning can do wonders for trees or tree-like shrubs, especially near a building. In the example of a vine maple planted next to a house, first take out the deadwood. Then prune off the branches that touch the building, if to do so does not exceed the pruning budget. (The pruning budget is the combination of the branch diameter and amount of foliage that can be removed without causing watersprouts, rot or dieback in any given plant. For trees, the limit is about one-eighth to one-sixteenth of the total foliage in a given pruning cycle, which lasts from five to ten years). The thinning cut for an understory tree should not exceed about one inch, most often much less. Use other PlantAmnesty pruning guidelines just to make it all look better: Thin out crossing/rubbing, broken, diseased and wrong-way branches, but never exceed the pruning budget described above.

A Touch of Charm
By now you should be feeling pretty good about your native garden. I’m always amazed at just how much material can be removed from a garden without anyone being able to tell that it has been touched. The garden still seems natural and even lush, but now looks

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THANK YOU!
The Arboretum Shop would like to thank its customers for all their support over the past year. We look forward to seeing you again in this new year.

Speaking of the new year…if you’re looking for a gift for that special someone in February, we have very competitively priced items to choose from. We’re a great place to shop for Valentine’s Day jewelry!

**Pacific Office Automation**
thanks the many dedicated employees and volunteers whose hard work makes it possible for all of us to enjoy the Arboretum.

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Tuesday to Sunday,
11 AM to 3 PM  Closed on Mondays

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Washington Park Arboretum Bulletin
nicer, with greater depth and detail. However, before you leave well enough alone, I’d like to put in a plug for the very lowest level of greenery. Now that several of the giant shrubs are gone, you have room to put in low groundcovers, self-seeding annuals and choice perennials that can give the native plant garden that ooo, ahh quality. So, when you can, leave some empty spaces on the forest floor, especially near the door and the walkways. You can then add a carpet of successful (wink, wink) groundcovers like oxalis or vancouveria and bleeding heart or bead ruby (false lily-of-the valley). You could salt the wood’s edges with robust, self-seeding annuals like piggy back plants, lupine, or columbine. For a more delicate area of well-matched, not-too-vigorous small guys, use deer ferns, foam flowers and vanilla leaf. And for the ultimate in woodland perfection, include a few trilliums, fawn lilies and, God willing, a living patch of bunchberry!

Intervention is FINE! You can rest and be proud of your reasonable facsimile of the beautiful and wonderful wild woods. And for those of you who can’t stand these sorts of strong-handed measures in your beloved native plant garden, you’re in luck. It’s your garden, and you can do whatever you want with it, or nothing at all, because in the end it needs only to please you.

Cass Turnbull is the founder of Plant Amnesty and writes articles and books on landscape maintenance and renovation, including “Cass Turnbull’s Guide to Pruning,” 2005; she is a member of the “Bulletin” Editorial Board.

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