

SHOOT OUT AT THANKSGIVING

Dana Prom Smith

Several years ago *meine Überfrau* and I had a shoot out at Thanksgiving. She'd asked me to make the gravy and stuffing, writing out the steps in gravy making. In the interests of efficiency, I compressed a few. The gravy clotted with free-floating radicals. "I just knew it!" she said, "You're always taking short cuts. You've just ruined the whole dinner." A former first-class flight attendant during TWA's days of glamour and glory, Gretchen takes elegance seriously.

A tense time was had by all. A mixed lot, we'd invited my mother-in-law, my former wife who pointed out a crack in the concrete walk, and my children who were adults. We'd also invited two couples, a flame-haired veganesque Wiccan priestess with a fungal theology who ate all the mixed nuts and her husband, a fleshy carnivorous hummingbird feeder salesman who dislocated the pot rack while gazing down my nubile granddaughter's bosom.

The other couple was a sallow-faced Assyrian Orthodox husband, complete with ancient indignations, orthodoxies, and ecclesiastical exclusivity, and his Sephardic Jewish wife from South Yemen who was

glad to be alive. Also, we'd invited a wounded and decorated Marine Gunnery/Sergeant from Camp Pendleton who was unsure of his footing in such an asymmetrical social mêlée. He played with our black lab, Flora. A malaise underlay the gathering until dispelled by Gretchen's magnificent feast.

Some gardens suffer the same malaise, something's going on below the surface, resulting in a garden that doesn't thrive. The problem's deep in the soil. Successful gardening is soil, and soil is "what you make of it."

The best guests for a soil dinner are those strangely-worded mycorrhizae which aren't discreet entities like a rock or a shovel, but fungal associations between the soil's nutrients and the plant's roots. Growing on their tips, they're little strands of fungi that pass from just outside the root to inside it. Spooky looking, they resemble a diaphanous spider web or Halloween gossamer. They can't be seen with the naked eye, lying well below our visual radar screens.

In corporate-speak, mycorrhizae are facilitators and in psycho-babble enablers. Although they're in the soil already, to function effectively they need soil amended with organic matter, such as vintage

cattle, horse, or chicken manure and compost.

Some mycorrhizae are good and some bad, the good are called mutualistic and the bad parasitic. If the soil isn't composted and too much artificial fertilizer is used, especially heavy doses of phosphorous, the mycorrhizae sometimes turn bad or parasitic. Ironically, sometimes artificial fertilizer withers plants.

As in life, good relationships mutually benefit everyone in the relationship. The plants take up the nutrients and release carbohydrates to the fungi all because of the mutualistic mycorrhizae. Everyone wins. The parasitic mycorrhizae suck nutrients out of the plant and don't deliver carbohydrates to the fungi. Everyone loses.

As the middle men of a thriving garden, mutualistic mycorrhizae are the *sine qua non* of gardening. They improve the absorption of nutrients and water, root and plant growth, and harvests. They also reduce transplant shock and stress from drought.

Amending the soil with organic matter does something else. It replenishes the earth rather than consuming it and cools the planet through water conservation and increased foliage. Concrete, asphalt,

and gravel heat it. It's thinking globally by sustainable gardening locally. What better way to thank God at Thanksgiving than having a sumptuous feast of manure and compost for the garden!

The Sephardic woman from South Yemen and I got along swimmingly because we both spoke the same Sephardic dialect of Hebrew. She rescued the gravy, vigorously smoothing it out with a wire whisk. The stuffing turned out well. I followed the directions. "For just once in your life, why don't you do as you're told?" The shrinks tell us that men often marry women like their mothers.

"Thank" is a transitive verb, requiring a direct object. Remember to thank your direct objects, the people who got the food on the table and, especially, the Presence who's not an object, but the Subject who made the feast possible. Pity the poor agnostics and atheists without a transitive verb.

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