

The gardener in question

I have to sow my seeds in a propagator to maintain a temperature of 70-85 F? The parable of the sower doesn't say anything about that.

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [August 11, 1999](#) issue

The parable of the sower has just failed at my house. Last winter I decided it was time to start a garden—not only because I thought it would give me pleasure but also because I hoped it might help me read the Bible. Since I moved to the country, I am more aware than ever what a rural preacher Jesus was. So many of his teachings rely on his listeners' firsthand knowledge of how fish, flocks and seeds behave. As the wife of a fly-fisherman and the caretaker of a dozen cats, dogs, horses and llamas, I have fish and flocks pretty well handled. But I remained innocent of seeds until last winter.

That was when I began clearing the mint from a sunny patch of earth outside my kitchen window. For those who may not know, mint is charming at first. It is pretty to look at, wonderful to smell and useful for Greek cooking, but once it gets going it is no respecter of boundaries. Its lateral roots prefer breadth to depth. They can take over a flowerbed in no time flat.

Since I hate the idea of poisoning the earth, I pulled up the mint by hand. Then, to be sure I got it all, I turned over the top six inches of dirt and picked out the remaining roots, along with some rocks and a hibernating toad. After that I added compost, lime and manure (the technical term is "llama berries"), mixed it all up and let it rest until spring.

I ordered my seeds from a company in England, choosing tall foxglove and lupin for the back, medium primula and campanula for the middle, and an assortment of short phlox and violas for the front. When they arrived, I read the germination instructions with alarm. Sow in trays in a propagator or warm place to maintain an optimum temperature of 70-85 F? Gradually acclimatize to outdoor conditions for

10-15 days before planting out? The parable of the sower had not said anything about that. The sower had simply sowed, letting the seed fall where it would. I, meanwhile, had hedged my bets by preparing excellent soil.

So I sowed—not in a propagator but directly in the ground. Some of the seeds were as big as black-eyed peas and others were as fine as dust. As I placed them here and there, I felt suddenly embarrassed, glad no one was watching me. What reasonable person could believe that these small pellets held life? I was operating entirely on faith.

The next several weeks I watered daily, hunting eagerly for any show of green. Then I left town for ten days and when I returned the garden was full of healthy young plants.

So far I do not recognize any that I put there. The mint is back, along with a thicket of tomato seedlings that must have come in with the compost. There are also some wild violets and the beginnings of some morning glory vines.

The rest of the plants are a mystery to me. Since they appear all over the garden I do not believe they emerged from my carefully placed seeds, but until they mature a little more I cannot be sure. In between and underneath them are some small shoots that look foreign enough to have come from England, but again I cannot be sure. For now I am letting the dandelion grow alongside the wheat, while I ponder this addendum to the gospel.

Preparing excellent soil is clearly not the whole story. There is no question I did a good job of that—so good that I expect I have the hardiest stand of weeds in the whole county. If I had done a better job of cultivating my seeds, then perhaps they would have been more able to compete. But I am not even sure about that. They were "my" seeds after all, the ones I selected and meant to make grow.

Meanwhile some other seeds got into my garden, and I do not really believe an enemy put them there (see Matthew 13:25). Some of them were there long before I dug a garden. They bore me no malice. They just lay low and waited to reclaim their place in the sun. Others came in by my own hand, as I shoveled compost rich with lettuce seeds and the rotted crusts of old tomato sandwiches. Still others blew in on the wind, touching down on my cleared patch of earth like parachutists glad for an easy landing.

I have not decided what to do about them yet. On one hand, I could reassert my will. I could consult my seed packets and rip up everything that does not match the pictures on the fronts. I could supplement my thin crop with some gerberas and marigolds from the feedstore. I could even give up, letting the mint grow back and forgetting my brief fantasy of a garden.

On the other hand, I could continue to tend this strange plot with its random mixture of weed and flower. My definition of a "weed," after all, is anything I did not plant. Wild violets are really very lovely. So are morning glories, especially when they grow up beside dandelions and buttercups. What if my job is not to select the seed but to prepare the soil? What if my call is to give myself to the work without getting too attached to the results?

Since I am new at gardening, I do not know the answer yet. Maybe there is not one answer, but many, depending on the gardener in question. One thing is for sure: some sower was here ahead of me. There is more life hidden in this rich earth than I could have asked for or imagined. All I had to do was bend down and look.