

Life Lessons: Let the garden grow wild - but keep the girls in line

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As the cooler, darker season approaches, I find myself pining for balmy days and sultry evenings that conjure images of revealing, brightly colored garb on maybe-not-so-sweet young things. Oh wait, that is "Girls Gone Wild," not - as I lovingly refer to it - my "garden gone wild." Although there are some striking similarities. And, as the mother of two teenage girls, I can easily see where those similarities merge and, most gratefully, where they do not.

First, it is vital to know that in regard to my girls, and my life in general, I am an unrepentant control freak. I feel most comfortable when I know exactly when, how, why and where every detail of my life, and the lives of my children, will unfold. I am, with no doubt, the classic helicopter mom: hovering, manipulating and directing - I mean guiding - my girls through every phase of their existence. Perhaps that is the reason that having one part of my life that is nearly completely out of my control is so darn appealing.

For as much as I want predictable and sane from my children, I want wild and whimsical from my garden. Don't get me wrong. While I thoroughly enjoy formal gardens and sincerely appreciate someone else's hard work and dedication to maintaining order and structure (and in fact, visiting these wonders of floral obedience and careful planning is one of my family's favorite vacation activities), I absolutely crave rambunctious, unruly outbursts of effervescent greens and beguiling pinks.

I welcome my volunteer nasturtiums running rampant over my back patio with their floppy leaves and Popsicle orange and yellow blossoms. I smile as they clamber up my neighbors' imposing wall in a naughty burst of spontaneous exuberance.

I sigh with happiness as my carpet roses smother my planter box, shoulder to stem with my woolly lavender and riotous rosemary. I revel in visits from hummingbirds, ladybugs, bees and butterflies flitting among a lawless chaos of purple and blue flowers. Through my open bedroom window I breathe in deeply, taking the sensuous

evening fragrance of the night-blooming jasmine - which is mischievously burying our chain-link fence and spilling over the concrete behind our shaggy, fruitful lemon tree.

Likewise, I relish my children bursting with accomplishment and blooming intellectual curiosity. I watch their problem-solving skills setting down roots, their nerve-racking (to me) independence growing and stretching in glorious, lacy patterns of trial and error - and, finally, thriving success. I inhale the sweet wind beneath their spreading wings, wanting to encourage steady self-reliance and hoping to gently coax their young lives through the inevitable dreary foggy days and nasty pests. I genuinely try to keep the micromanagement of every life stage to a minimum. Yeah, right.

Honestly, given my druthers, I'd rather take a strictly hands-off approach with both my garden and my children. Because as a mother and a gardener, I am not very fond of the day-to-day chores of maintenance and, gulp, discipline.

I cringe at the thought of pruning, weeding and timing watering to coincide with hot spells. I like nature to take its course. What will be will be. Except when it becomes obvious that some hands-on care and tough love will ultimately reveal the most profound beauty. Deadheading the roses, thankfully, is a case of "the easy no." Is this opening bud too young to remove from mother plant? Does that wide-open, sweet-smelling face still have what it takes to grace our dining room table for a few luscious days? Or does the flower dissolve, petals scattering in my hand at the slightest touch? That is "the easy no." Thank you for sharing your perfume and hue on the bush, but it is into the green barrel you go.

I often find myself yearning for child-rearing practices so obvious and easy. But when it comes to precious kids, control freaks like me dread ambiguity: What will happen if I give in this time? If I let the bloom go off the rose? Nothing much. If I let the child take the bus to Berkeley? Who knows? That is why I have discovered, raising kids, that I applaud and leap for joy at the easy no's.

"Can I ride my bike down the middle of the street at midnight?"

"That's easy. No."

What would happen, I wonder, if I surrendered my micromanaging mothering style to my laissez faire gardening philosophy? Again, who knows?

What I do know is that my disciplinary tactics are always bound to be far from consistent as I nurture my enchanting meadow of a yard, and my equally magical daughters. Perhaps that is why I will always hope for the "easy no" when it comes to both my garden and my girls.

My crazy "garden gone wild" is a delight and could never be described as a neighborhood eyesore. It is not unkempt, raunchy or sleazy. It does not engage in risky behavior that it will later regret. It does not drink or let itself be talked into being something it is not. And neither do my charming girls. My garden gone wild is an inviting and surprisingly well-behaved plot of floral pleasure. But it is my flowering girls, who have definitely not gone wild (despite my less than meticulous mothering), who are my most vivid and flourishing source of pride and pleasure.