



## ZEN DIVA OF THE DIRT

*"Weeding is a meditation that reaches down into the heart of the garden, centering body and breath on that secret garden hidden underneath a tangle of weeds. With a settled mind, weeds become a patterned veil laid over the intentional fabric of your garden, a curtain that you can lift to find the hidden brocade below."*

*-Wendy Johnson*

I inhale and repeat this to myself as I pull weeds from my front yard. Innocently, my sweet 5 yr. old neighbor blows on a large dandelion sending its plume of fairy dust seeds over our shared fence. Horrified, I jump up from my knees, remove my Ipod earphones blasting U2's Sunday Bloody Sunday, and chastise her for spreading 600 weed seeds in my yard on Easter morning. Oh, Wendy Johnson, my Zen diva of the dirt, come heal me of my sins!

Last month I participated in a hands-on soil workshop at Green Gulch Farm. It was sponsored by the San Francisco Botanical Garden and taught by Zen/Gardening Master, Wendy Johnson. Johnson has spent 25 years here with her husband Peter, who is also an avid gardener and farmer. They also raised their two children at Green Gulch. Part gardener, part mom and part brilliant science teacher, Johnson tells us that 'soil has its own voice' and we must learn how to listen to it. One cup of fertile soil holds more living things (bacteria and other microorganisms) than there are human beings on the planet. Though this information hurts my head and is difficult for a New Yorker to grasp, it is a fact. She adds, "The ground that is cultivated in the garden is common ground, shared by many and host to multitudes. Every particle of soil, every atom of earth, is alive with mystery and potential all stirred up together. Every soil is a long winding story, told in the voices of water and inhaled and exhaled air, of the stone-slow cycle of rock itself becoming soil, and in the voices of the swarming masses of microorganisms feeding, breeding, and dying on fertile dust, creating new life out of their own bodies made from exploded stone."

Her new book, "**Gardening at the Dragon's Gate**" was published this spring by Bantam books. In the Asian world, the dragon represents "an edge:the meeting of the known and the unknown worlds." Her book will have you calmly captivated as you learn about soil texture, assassin bugs, nitrogen fixation, perennial division, stamens and pistils. She even has the audacity to suggest that you *slow* down and *sit* in your garden, and

to sometimes walk around your yard aimlessly yet mindfully. “Begin by sitting still and doing absolutely nothing,” she writes. Can you imagine *that!* *YOU try it!* She also shares, “At Green Gulch, we don’t proselytize about Zen but we certainly do preach the gospel of hot compost.” Johnson has quite a rare gift for crafting such graceful prose on the subject of “arranging garbage in your compost pile” and “heat loving bacteria and fungi.” Almost brings a tear to the eye!

If you haven’t been to Green Gulch Farm, you must go. Though it may appear secluded and mysterious, it is open to the public. Come down the hill and sit on a garden bench, and you will certainly become aware of the internal chatter of your own busy mind. My heart goes out to you if your inner dialogue sounds anything like mine . . .

*“This place is WEIRD. Oh, look, Crabapple trees. How fancy! Why is it my best friends sometimes get on my nerves? Is it me or them? Them, I bet. Yikes, a Zen monk walking in a saffron robe. Okay, breathe and STOP thinking already. Focus, focus. Why do they shave their heads? Maybe they think there’s going to be drug testing. Non-judgment and compassion I beckon you NOW! Jesus, hurry UP! With all that mercury in tuna, I don’t know what to eat for lunch. When will the Pacific Sun give me another front-page story to write? Wouldn’t it be hilarious to have a Starbucks here? There’s definitely a conspiracy of silence spying on me right this minute. When does Oprah sleep?”*

But soon enough you’ll be cozy and at ease with the sun warming your face. You’ll feel gratitude for the surrounding lush green hills, thriving fruit trees, fields of flourishing organic vegetables, English roses, giant sunflowers, lavender borders, the adobe shed with plants growing on its roof, the bronze Buddhist temple bell, the sound of stillness momentarily interrupted by bird calls, and the clean, cool Muir Beach air.



Leonardo da Vinci observed some five centuries ago that, “We know more about the movement of celestial bodies than about the soil under our feet.” Johnson’s new book mystically reunites us with the earth, and back to one another. In between beautifully written stories on Buddhist meditation practice, her passionate and eccentric horticultural professors, the web of a plant’s life and death, her fondness for teaching inner-city kids to appreciate insects; especially the mighty ‘Walking Stick’, she reminds us all to appreciate the present moment, our own heart and mind, and of course, the fact that there’s nothing like ‘delicious aged horse manure’ to kick-start your garden.