

Nature or Nurture



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Up

Giftedness - Nature or Nurture

By Stephanie S. Tolan

Giftedness -- nature or nurture?

When we have a baby it's like acquiring a seed that we are expected to plant and grow. Let's say it's a flower seed. We're responsible gardeners and we are determined to do our very best. We start by doing the normal things. We plant it. We water it. As it first sticks its white-and-soon-green self up through the ground, it looks just like all the other seedlings around it (this is why most gardeners put markers where they plant seeds so they'll know which is which when they first come up).

Our problem when our children are exceptionally gifted is that they're "exotics." They don't come pre-labeled in neat little packages that tell us what they need. Full sun? Partial shade? Acid or alkaline soil? Lots of water or hardly any? Sand or loam? We go looking in the gardening books for help and there we find plenty of information about how to raise daisies. The trouble is, we're not raising daisies! So we're on our own. We have to discover what our seedlings need for ourselves. It takes a whole lot of nerve and very close observation.

But no matter how closely we observe our seedling, we can't tell at this early stage whether it's going to be 3 inches high (good for a garden border) or 24 inches high with an absolute need for a fence or stake to lean against. Is its blossom going to appear early and be so large and spectacular that the stem will bend over from the weight, or is it going to have tens or hundreds of tiny flowerets clustered around the stem so that no single one stands out? We have to be ready for anything.

What pests are likely to damage it? Is that wasp buzzing around it going to lay eggs that will sap its strength or disfigure it, or is the wasp only going to pollinate the flower? And how do we tell before it's too late?

We do what we can and we hope and we pray that we're doing it right. We search out the few books or pamphlets that deal with exotics and

hope we'll recognize our own kind in there and find helpful instructions. We get together with other gardeners who are also raising exotics and hope that what they're having success with will succeed for us, too -- always having to remember that they may be raising an exotic that needs shade, while ours needs full sun! We talk to older gardeners who have lots of experiences with lots of exotic flowers and hope that they'll recognize the characteristics we're observing and will be able to offer advice about what has worked for that sort of exotic before. And meanwhile, we watch closely, follow our instincts, do what seems right.

Nature is the foundation. Each individual seed comes with the whole blueprint, the whole plan, and all the "design capacity" to become what it is meant to be. But if it is dumped on a parking lot and ignored it isn't likely even to germinate, let alone grow. (Except for the occasional "miracle" seed that finds a crack and blooms in spite of all the odds against it.) Important as nature is, nurture is critical too. And that part -- both challenging and gratifying -- is our task no matter how exotic our offspring may be.