

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Imagine this: You have inherited a dream garden. Covering more than one and a half acres, it is divided into 26 individual gardens, such as a shade garden, a children's garden, a vegetable garden, a Japanese garden, an herb garden, a rose garden...there's even an "enabling garden" full of planting beds raised high enough to allow physically challenged gardeners to enjoy their favorite pastime.

You tend the garden with love and care, filling every nook and cranny with your favorite flora. In the shade garden, you place unique ferns and other shade-loving plants. The other gardens receive herbs, rhododendrons, Japanese maples, roses, fuchsias, boxwood shrubs, pansies, petunias, impatiens, marigolds, zinnias, variegated boxwood, ornamental trees, and more. The list is almost endless. To welcome visitors at the entrance, you firmly mount on a 4x4 post a beautiful ceramic pot, donated by an artist from Sedro-Woolley. Your efforts represent thousands of dollars' worth of plants, ornamental objects, and time.

Your garden becomes known throughout Skagit County, a destination for people of all ages. You keep it open from dawn until dusk, seven days a week, 365 days a year. You charge no admission fee, choosing instead to allow visitors to give donations as they wish. You host educational events at the garden, designed to teach children and adults about nature's interplay, the wonder of growing things. You develop a group of dedicated volunteers who help you care for the garden, answering questions from guests as they stroll the paths. You even add a pavilion and picnic area, with a covered sitting area for meetings; and a small lawn with picnic tables. Your message to the community is clear: This is *your* garden. Discover it. Learn from it. Enjoy it.

One morning in June of this year you wake up and, during your morning walk through the garden, you notice something isn't quite right. The spot where just the week before you planted a rhododendron is empty; only a hole remains. The rhododendron has been stolen.

As the summer months go by, the scene replays itself with little variation, save for the type of plant that is gone. Your ferns are stolen; the shade garden is decimated. More rhododendrons are plucked from their places, leaving gaping holes. Every new fuchsia you plant is stolen. A valuable Japanese maple is yanked out. Coleus, roses, boxwood shrubs, rosemary plants, pansies, petunias, a boxleaf honeysuckle, impatiens, marigolds—all stolen. In addition, as if to add insult to injury, more plants are stomped underfoot when the intruder is unable to pull them from the ground.

If you think this kind of abuse could never happen to your garden, think again, it just did. The WSU Discovery Garden, maintained by WSU Master Gardener volunteers but belonging to everyone in Skagit County, has come through a summer during which dozens of plants and that handcrafted ceramic pot were stolen. The list of casualties includes all of the above, plus 10 flats of seed starts that were lifted from a greenhouse on site. Placing a value on the losses is difficult, but it's certainly safe to assume a price tag in the hundreds of dollars. Factor in the time spent planting and replacing stolen items, and the figure easily climbs into the thousands.

We are not naïve. We are aware that most public gardens in the U.S. have to deal with theft and vandalism. However, the level of theft the WSU Discovery Garden sustained this year is unprecedented. Therefore, we ask you, the members of our community, to help us keep this jewel looking her best—a goal that cannot be accomplished if we drape chains and padlocks over

all the plants.

Please help us watch the garden, which is located at 16602 State Route 536 in west Mount Vernon next to the WSU Northwestern Washington Research & Extension Center. If you see any suspicious activity in the garden or adjoining parking lot before dawn or after dusk, call 911 immediately and report it. You do not need to be a hero; we are not asking you to dress up in military fatigues and stake out the garden. Simply keep your eyes peeled and give the garden a closer look as you drive by. Please.

The WSU Discovery Garden has been a community asset for almost a decade. By joining with us to protect it, you can help us ensure that it will be around for decades more.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

