

SUBURBAN DIARY

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## Furry, conniving, and entertaining

By Susan Weiner | December 26, 2004

*Another in an occasional series of essays about how we live our lives.*

As my husband, Allan, pulled our car into our driveway, a fluffy tail flashed across the top of our old-fashioned, sideways-opening wooden garage doors.

"Did you see a squirrel up there?" I asked as I squinted and pointed my finger.

"You're nuts," Allan replied in his characteristically confident tone.

I hopped out of the car and walked forward to open the doors. My eyes drifted upward and focused on the right door's formerly straight top edge.

"That squirrel was eating our garage door!" I shrieked. "Allan, that sneaky little squirrel was trying to break into the garage."

It looked like a giant had taken a bite out of the brittle wood. The door's natural color peeked out from under the dull, black paint.

"Open the doors, would ya?" said Allan. "We can talk about it later. The poor little guy was probably hungry." We had some seeds stored in the garage.

I sighed. Where would the madness stop? We'd brought the rodents' attention on ourselves a couple years earlier.

It all started with a gardening experiment. I'd read that sunflowers are easy to grow. Even little kids can do it, so it sounded ideal for a beginning gardener like me. When my husband left for the home superstore, I asked him to buy me some sunflower seeds.

I expected he'd bring me a petite envelope with a photo of a bold sunflower head splashed across the front. A dozen seeds would rattle at the bottom of the lightly glued container. I'd tip them out into the palm of my hand to examine them.

When Allan got home, he came into the kitchen, where I was unloading the dishwasher. "Where do you want me to put your seeds?" he yelled.

"Just bring them in and leave them on the counter until I get around to planting them," I said.

"I don't think that'll work. It's a big bag."

"Huh?"

"I'll bring it to show you."

When Allan returned, his gait was slowed by the weight of the bag of heavy-gauge plastic, decorated with a four-color drawing of happy birds. It held 25 pounds of sunflower seeds.

"You didn't tell me what size to buy," protested Allan, when I questioned where he thought I could plant the million or so seeds in the bag. OK, he was right. I hadn't specified size. Anyway, I wondered if seeds meant for bird food might have been sterilized, so I never planted any of them.

Neither Allan nor I got around to returning the seeds to the store. Eventually, Allan dumped a pile of them on the ground at the far end of our backyard, so the birds could eat them, as pictured on the bag.

The seeds sat there for a while. No birds ventured there, but squirrels came. They came, and they ate, and they ate, and they ate.

I hadn't looked closely at squirrels before, but they're cute. Sort of like teddy bears. I remember reading that teddy bears were created in President Theodore Roosevelt's time and had realistic proportions, including longish limbs and torso.

Over time, their limbs shrank to proportions that we as humans find more endearing. Squirrels come preshrunk, I observed. Their limbs are so short, they're barely distinguishable at a distance from their chubby, rounded bodies.

When they eat, they sit on their haunches, with their tails curling gracefully away from them like backward question marks.

If I thought the squirrels were cute, my husband wanted to adopt them. After the first bag of seeds ran out, he bought another. And another, and another, and another.

Then Allan started to fuss about the squirrel feeding area. "They don't like it when the seeds get wet," he lamented. But Allan didn't just whine. He's a man of action. He scavenged a blue plastic tray to hold their seeds. "To protect their seeds from the damp ground," he said. Then, "to protect them from the rain," he started building a shelter from a child's plastic table that the previous owners of our house had abandoned in our bushes.

Eventually, the seed shelter evolved into a two-story structure. Allan built it using scrap lumber, a mop stick, and brand-new plexiglass positioned "so the squirrels can see out." The seed tray is on the second story, which has walls on three sides for optimal protection against rain and wind. That's when I started calling it the Squirrel Palace. Perhaps Squirrel Palace Hotel would be more appropriate, because the squirrels act as if they're eating room service.

When the food runs out, a snippy squirrel will push the tray onto the ground, like a hotel guest leaving his emptied dishes in the hall.

So how have squirrels repaid the hospitality offered by my husband and me?

They've dug up and devoured flower bulbs I've ordered by the hundreds from a wholesaler and planted at careful intervals in my yard. They left a few mouthfuls of my Halloween pumpkin as a souvenir after devouring it. They've gnawed holes in my heavy-duty plastic garbage cans.

They've even gnawed holes in the heavier plastic of the bin where we eventually stored our hoard of sunflower seeds -- which we dubbed "squirrel seeds." But Allan eventually foiled that exercise. I knew there was a reason Allan never threw anything out.

With the same ingenuity that built the Squirrel Palace, Allan created a cage around the squirrel seed bin. He wired together racks from our defunct dishwasher and refrigerator and weighted them down with cement blocks.

So what if it now takes five minutes to reach the seed bags? It's worth it to see those cute little animals chomping away contentedly after Allan replenishes their stock.

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