

"When I first started gardening in Nevada, I lived out in the desert, and all I had was pure sand," Baren said. "Gardening in pure sand is a totally different experience from gardening in river soil, which is what I had out in Verdi or what I had down on Mayberry Drive. And what I've got here is pure clay."

Beginners facing a similar problem should find soil amendments that promote a "sandy loam" consistency, but be prepared for an afternoon of hard work. Reno soil is notoriously hard and rocky. Otherwise, said Baren, build a bed.

"When you build up and put it in a bed with compost, you can develop your own friability—how easily it comes apart—which means how easily the roots go into the soil," Baren said. "You can have the soil tested or you can test it yourself. Check the pH, say, 'What does it need in terms of minerals?' And add some to it."

Baren doesn't hold much stock in old wives' tales about gardening, but she doesn't disregard their premise either.

"I don't disparage old wives," she said. "When I hear those, I ask myself, 'What's the kernel of truth here and has our circumstance changed that this doesn't apply?' But oftentimes there's a kernel of truth we disregard or dismiss because it's old."

However, after moving into her home in Northwest Reno four years ago, she

heard a saying from an unlikely source that she was astonished to see come true so vividly in her own backyard.

"I learned this from the most unusual gardener I've ever known," Baren said. "[She] taught me, when you're putting a plant in and it's going to be one of your permanent plants, she said, 'The first year, sleep; the second year, creep; and the third year, leap.' And you can see right out there in the yard, the plants that had been there for three years. Oh my god, the leaf on it is amazing."

Baren built her gardening knowledge on resources like the Rodale Press series of gardening books, and any number of online digital resources. She subscribes to a method of gardening called permaculture, which is less interested in maximizing short term vegetable production, and more in creating a landscape consisting of edible plants.

"So, in a permaculture garden, you might have a grove of trees, food trees, but there'll be berries planted underneath them, or there'll be herbs planted underneath them," Baren said. "And there'll be different levels of plants that are edible and are harvestable but are not in any kind of row format."

Baren's attitude of living with her plants instead of taking from them has led her to consider each of them as individuals instead of just part of the overall yield

of her garden. After a long time spent observing her surroundings and her own interactions with different plant species in different weather, she's learned to look for the signs.

"Eventually, you'll have to ask yourself, 'I wonder what this plant wants,'" Baren said.

In more ways than one, Baren feels like she communicates with her plants, and finds a sense of communion in the simplicity of helping a plant grow.

"The act of growing plants was a sacred and very ancient act," Baren said. "And when we engage in it with respect, without using poisons and pesticides, we are tying ourselves deeply to the mother, and the mother is nourishing us deeply through those plants. And that's why I talk about them as persons."

Permaculture can include semi-advanced gardening systems like building hoops houses and composting, and even advanced techniques like grafting limbs from different fruit trees onto a single trunk to produce different fruits every spring. But the more difficult aspects of gardening are mastered with time, Baren said, and if gardeners of any level are looking for sage words of wisdom or advice from past growing seasons in Reno—you might as well go to the source.



Wendy Hanson Mazet tends to some of the crops growing in the UNCE's greenhouses.

"As you mature as a gardener, yeah, you know, you're looking at climate, you're looking at which plant you're growing, is it happy, what about the soil and where is it in the scheme of the entire environment?" Baren said. "But that's a long-term thinking project. So, the best thing a new gardener can do? You just hook up with an old gardener." □



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