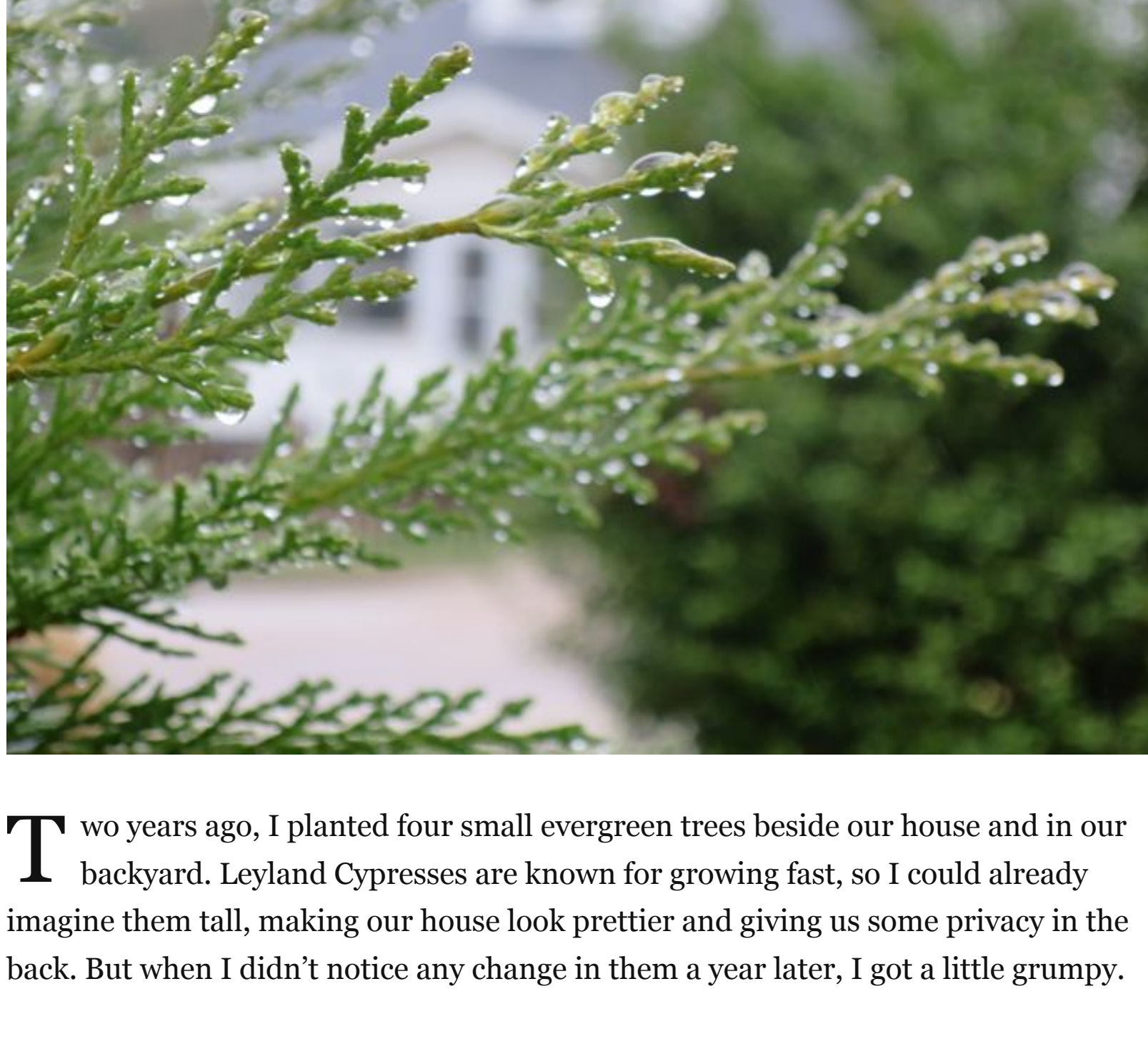


APRIL 15, 2014

A GARDENING SECRET AND HOW IT APPLIES TO OUR LIVES



Two years ago, I planted four small evergreen trees beside our house and in our backyard. Leyland Cypressess are known for growing fast, so I could already imagine them tall, making our house look prettier and giving us some privacy in the back. But when I didn't notice any change in them a year later, I got a little grumpy.

My mom, who is a seasoned gardener, happened to be visiting so she took a look at the trees and the ends of their fronds. She thought they were doing just fine, and she reminded me of a well-known expression in the horticultural world: the first year they sleep, the next year they creep, and the third year they leap.

Of course! The saying made perfect sense. When a plant has been sitting in a nursery in a five-gallon pot with its friends for a long time, why wouldn't it need time to adjust to a new home? For the newcomer, everything is different: the type of soil it is expected to latch onto, the amount of light it is given, the micro-climate in its new area, and the other creatures and plants that surround it.



All I was thinking of was my end goal. The trees I imagined would soar up to the second floor of our house, tall and elegant like Tuscan pines. They would shield our space from foot traffic on the street and tower over the backyard like a sentinel.

These plants were teaching me the patience I needed to allow them to thrive in their own time, and I began to see how they were also teaching me parallel lessons about my own life.

When we moved into this place in Tenleytown, Washington, D.C. almost three years ago, everything was new to us too. We had never met any of our neighbors, and our children had never poked their heads into the schools they would attend, never met any of the kids who went there. We had to start from zero with doctors, DMVs, and dishwasher repairmen.



I certainly didn't expect my kids to instantly adjust and thrive upon arrival. In fact, having moved so much in their growing years due to my husband's medical training, I knew transplanting them again was stressful (for Sofia, this move would mean starting at her fourth elementary school).

Like a tree getting used to the earth it's been dropped into, a child must dedicate a lot of energy to basic things like figuring out where the drinking fountain is and how the cafeteria works. But I don't think anyone can thrive until they also know important things like who can they trust, who might be their friends, and what are their strengths and interests.

But the sleep-creep-leap parallel never struck me more than this year, our third year in D.C. Our daughter, the one who as a small child didn't want to leave my lap during birthday parties, was blossoming. She had settled into a small group of friends, she had waited and watched and then tried out for the school play, and she seemed confident and happy.

Like a tree who is transplanted, she needed a year to observe and test boundaries before she was really ready to grow. Which made me wonder how sleep, creep, leap could be applied to all sorts of situations, and how it could help me be more empathetic and patient with myself and other people.



For example, if I were taking on a new job, I would be wise to give myself time to get acquainted with my boss, the work culture and its history, and my colleagues before I expected great accomplishments from myself. If I were a supervisor, hopefully I would give the same leeway to a new hire by allowing her time, but also by making the conditions rich for thriving: orienting her, encouraging her, giving her the tools and support she needed to do her job well.

Knowing sleep-creep-leap encouraged me to give grace in all kinds of situations, even small ones like going to parties. For example, when I arrive at a party where I know no one, allow myself space to quietly observe and make small talk before I try to make connections. If we are learning how to do something new, like playing the piano or making pottery, we should know that it will take a while of sleeping and slow creeping before our fingers dance across the keys or we can make a bowl that can hold a ladleful of soup.

The wisdom of trees even applied to our settling into this house. Even though I was eager to start working on it, things were so busy with my blog business and getting settled into a new city, that we had to wait (or sleep). Which was a good thing, because the wisdom says to live in a house for a year before you make any changes so you get to know its microclimate: what works and what doesn't in all seasons of the year.

The second year, we crept into renovating. I'm now grateful for this slow pace, because we had a lot to learn. After a few small projects were under our belt, we were ready to make bigger strides in the third year. By that time, I had the confidence and experience to know what I wanted and to speak up about it.



Just last week I looked out of our dining room window at one of our lovely Leyland Cypressess that we had planted in the backyard. Unlike the ones on the side of our house, which now did look like shaggy, lanky teenagers, this one didn't look like it had grown at all. I sighed, chalking up the lack of vigor to too much clay in the soil or not enough light.

But when I went out to the yard and took a few fronds in my hands, I realized that this tree had in fact adapted beautifully. The last six inches of each branch was a lighter green than the rest. This new growth was impossible to see from afar, but when I took the time to look closely, I could see it clearly.

I hadn't even noticed this tree's changing, because it had been creeping. And here was another lesson for me. Whether it's a child learning to read or getting your house turned around after relatives have visited for the holidays, progress can be glacially slow. So slow that you don't even notice there is any, and you might begin to lose heart. But if you keep on going — watering, fertilizing, whispering encouragement — there will be change. And probably a leap.

All of a sudden an afternoon will free up, and you'll get everything put away, the laundry folded, and the vet appointment done, and then you find yourself dreaming about hosting the next party. Or, after many afternoons of pushing through homework, whining and tears, and rewards that didn't even work, one day your son will shout out a whole sentence that he's read on a billboard. I know, because it's happened to me.

Amy

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9 COMMENTS

Kate Gilbert May 28, 2014, 6:39 pm

Hi Amy, I love your blog. I don't know whether you would remember me (Kate from the writers' group in Milan years ago). It's lovely that Frugal Mama has developed so well. Just get those leylandii away from your house! They grow to over 100feet when they are in the forest, believe me, they don't belong in a suburban garden. They will soon be too big and dark and cut out the light. Replace them with something slower-growing.

Amy June 3, 2014, 10:30 am

Hi Kate,

It's great to hear from you! I loved seeing your blog about Lake Como. What a blessed life you are living.

Thank you for your warning about the Leyland Cypressess. I bought a new variety called Emerald Isle that only gets to 20-25 ft tall (and 6-8 ft) wide, so we should be safe. I so wished we could have had Tuscan cypresses, but they wouldn't survive in the D.C. humidity.

Thank you for getting back in touch, and best of luck with your blog!
Amy

Nina April 25, 2014, 10:14 am

Change can be so difficult, so I give myself at least two weeks of awkward adjusting before I complain. From new jobs to new homes, those first few weeks can sometimes be disheartening. Nothing works in the house, the learning curve at the job is so high. Then you remember that you felt that way too about your old job or your old home and you cut yourself some slack.

What is so familiar to us was at one point, quite new, and I remind myself this all the time. I love your tree analogy too even for the lesson in patience. Especially with trees; they take forever! :)

Jenny April 16, 2014, 11:49 am

Someone said about child rearing... The days are long and the years are short. It is so hard some times as you say to see progress when you are right on top of something seeing it every day. I also find that starting projects can be so hard sometimes...because typically they are undefined or unwieldy. So remembering the sleep, creep, leap motto you created will help get through the hard beginnings. Your posts are always so poetic and resonant.

Amy April 23, 2014, 10:26 am

Dear Jenny,

You make a great point about how the days are long. When you are in the middle of something, you don't have a birds' eye perspective. I guess that's why they say other people's kids grow fast!

Thank you for your sweet words,
Amy

EBK Riley April 16, 2014, 9:37 am

I really enjoyed this post. Love your use of such a wonderful analogy to the world of nature. It is a goos reminder that we need to be aware of all kinds of growth- creeping and leaping included. Thanks!

Amy April 23, 2014, 10:28 am

Dear EBK,

I like how you point out that growth has different paces (sleeping too); but that all of them are indeed growth.

Thank you for writing,
Amy

Jenny Timm April 16, 2014, 8:47 am

I LOVE this post.

It is so beautiful and wise. Wow.

Thank you!

Amy April 23, 2014, 10:31 am

Dear Jenny,

You're so sweet to say so! People who work close to nature, like gardeners, are likely to gain more wisdom. We are all part of the natural world (even though we might not live our modern lives that way).

Take care,
Amy

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