I'm running for my life. The furious buzzing of bald-faced hornets flying at me is terrifying. To minimize the damage, I get down on my knees and crawl toward the house, screaming and cursing: “Get off me, dammit! Get away from me, grrrr!”

I scrape them off my sleeves with gloved hands, when I feel the first sting. One has crawled inside my glove. The nerve! I get up and run, shedding my jacket, covered with hornets. Eventually I get inside the house and ice my red, swollen hand.

Later, I realize that as I’d been pruning a tall seven sons (Heptacodium) with my long-handled saw, I must have jostled the hornet’s nest. Although they’re sizable, the papery nests hide quietly within a tree until disturbed. Then, their inhabitants come alive with a vengeance! Even after Wes, a professional from a local animal removal service, sprays the nest and shows it to me before taking it down, I have trouble spotting it. I walk all around the tree several times before I see the long, off-white structure hanging within the twiggy branches.

Another time, I’m pruning blackberry canes and notice a few stabs that feel like blackberry thorns . . . until I see that my sleeves are alive with yellow jackets. I race for the house, shedding my jacket along the way. I take a Benadryl and ice the stings.
SCARY SEED PODS AND PLANT SAP

Even the plants attack me. Don’t they know that I’m the one who waters, fertilizes, prunes and mulches them? Apparently that doesn’t stop them. While pruning a Siberian iris, a dark-brown seed pod pops me right in the eye. Back inside the house, I use an eye wash and peer in the mirror. My eyeball is as red as a tomato.

It’s Sunday, when doctors tend their own gardens, so my husband Tom drives me to Urgent Care, where the nurse practitioner paints my eye with a yellow dye.

“Your cornea is scratched,” she says. “How bad is it?” I ask, and Tom takes a look, and says, “It resembles the state of Pennsylvania,” making me laugh, as usual.

The nurse prescribes an antibiotic cream and instructs me to see my ophthalmologist the next day. The worst part is when the doctor forbids me to garden or read for at least a day. I beg, but he refuses to let me read, even for an hour. Oh the misery! Listening to music or watching a show doesn’t come close to the pleasure of reading a novel. Especially since my library books sit there, calling to me like ice cream in the freezer!

Sometimes the damage takes time to show up. One evening I’m washing my hair when my eyes begin to burn. At first I think it’s the shampoo, but no matter how much I rinse, the pain persists. As I cry into my dinner, I review the day and remember pruning the spent stems of Euphorbia wulfenii that afternoon. I must have touched some of the milky sap with my gloves, and then pushed my hair back, transferring sap to my hair.

I cry Euphorbia tears all evening and resolve to remove every Euphorbia in the garden, except for Euphorbia palustris, which has such deep roots it would take a bulldozer to ream it out. I keep a wide berth while near it, and let it grow and die down au naturel.

MENACING MUD AND GARDEN IMPLEMENTS

Sometimes my own determination gets me in trouble. When the winter rains let up, even for an hour, the sun seduces me into the soggy garden. The lawn is a sponge underfoot as I slog my way to the lower garden, intending to cut back the stems of Sedum ‘Matrona’.

Once sturdily upright, the plant now flops onto the grass. I’m so eager to get the job done that I fail to notice how muddy the edge of the bed has become. I take one step towards the sedums, and suddenly I’m sliding down and landing on my keister with a thump. Surprise!

I scramble to my knees, laughing hysterically as I sink further into the mud. Very slowly I rise up, trying not to fall again. My backside, knees and hands are coated in mud as I walk towards the house, flashing on the image of Prometheus creating man from clay. I hope the neighbors aren’t witnessing my sorry state or, heaven forbid, taking my picture!

More embarrassing yet is the time I prune my own finger. I’m just starting a summer job as a maintenance gardener for the City of Beaverton, after leaving my career in social work. I’m trimming an overgrown rhododendron when I feel a sharp pain in my index
finger. Blood rushes out of a deep cut! Oh no! I wrap the finger in my hanky and rush to the office for help.

My boss, Jimmy, who’s half my age, smirks when he sees my bloody finger. I’m aware that he wanted to hire another young guy, but his boss overruled him. I’m afraid that my clumsiness will get me fired, or that I will be teased mercilessly by the all-male crew.

Still, Jimmy drives me to my doctor for stitches, and her kindness turns the day around. I promise myself to prune much more mindfully, to always stay focused. That summer I hold my own, weeding and pruning with great vigilance. I type my first entry in a resume, aspiring to become an estate gardener. I learn the most important lesson in gardening: paying careful attention is even more important than learning botanical names.

MORE WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS
Still, there’s always a learning curve. Will that mama raccoon marching through my garden attack me? I yell, and she lopes away, but then turns around to give me the evil eye. And what about that coyote den at the very lowest point of the garden, between me and my neighbor? I hear the coyotes yipping at night, but so far they don’t appear in daylight.

The garden continues to be a dangerous place, but I have to risk it. It may not be tranquil all the time, but it’s the most joyful adventure of my life. The first hellebore buds in early winter, the scent of Daphne in spring, the unfurling of tassel ferns, the brilliant colors of day lilies, and the first sweet ‘Desert King’ fig melting in my mouth, far outweigh the dangers. Falling in love with gardening is risky, but there’s nothing that comes closer to living in paradise.

Barbara Blossom Ashmun has written eight gardening books, most recently “A Gardener’s Haiku” (Easy Chair Press, 2022)—a collection of poems about the joys and wonders, disappointments and transformations that color a gardener’s life. She wrote a column for the “Portland Tribune” from 2004 through 2011, and was a contributing editor to “Fine Gardening” for many years.