HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

NEW YEAR

I am ready to begin a new year as we continue the cycle of life. It is time for optimism, hope for a new season of growth, good health, safety and a new roof!

I really enjoy the colorful lights of the holidays, the cheerful music and the bright poinsettias, camellias and azaleas. Now it is time to move on, make change happen and learn lessons from nature that is around us.

The woods are alive with wild things. I hear cardinals and wrens when I work outside. They whistle while I work. Lesson: I will be more cheerful as I work to inspire others to accomplish their goals and achieve great things.

A gopher tortoise has been thinking of taking up residence in my yard. Maybe he will like all the exposed sand since stormy winds knocked my trees down. I know it is a "he" because the male tortoise has an indentation in the underside of his shell to facilitate breeding.

He will make a long oval burrow in the sand in a protected area, probably near a tree stump. His shell is flattened and oval and the borrow opening is the same size as he is so he can go in, turn around and leave. He uses long claws on his front feet to dig and pushes a mound of sand outside the burrow with his hind feet. Lesson: Don’t let the opening of my home show you my size. Back off on the chocolate and get moving to burn the calories saved up for the winter.

The long passage way becomes home for many other critters that prefer to hide in the same space, protected underground. Several hundred different animals have been identified as living commensally with (in association with) gopher tortoises. I think of friends together for the holiday. Lesson: Be happy, enjoy each other’s company, but keep your own space.

I also observed spotted ladybugs feeding on aphids and immature scale insects as I was admiring some holiday holly growing at our condo complex. The red ladybugs were pretty well disguised among the red holly berries. They are considered beneficial insects because they feed on harmful insects which pierce plant leaves and siphon the sap out of plants. One animal’s demise fulfills the life of another. Lesson: Pay attention to life and don’t get so wrapped up in what you are doing that you are consumed.

Many of the mature trees at the apartments next to our condo unit were blown down leaving few natural areas for animal nesting and resting. Squirrels easily climb stucco walls and jump across the rooftops. When they think you are looking, they quickly flatten like a pancake to lie close to the building. Do they really think I cannot see them? Lesson: Be flexible. Make the best of your situation, whatever it is.

As I was driving around town, I saw large flocks of sandhill cranes feeding in yards and pastures. Though we have many resident family pairs living here year round, we are also winter home to thousands of cranes and other birds seeking milder, warmer weather. We are on a migratory bird flyway and many species come just for the winter. Keep binoculars and a bird book handy and add a few to your "life list" as serious birders call it. Lesson: As bad as things seem, they are surely worse somewhere else.

The storms toppled many trees on my lot. Fortunately, none of us were hurt and the insurance will help rebuild the damage to the house and other buildings. While clearing some of the downed branches, we watched a large red shouldered hawk swoop down and grab a little mouse that was feeding on new shoots at the forest edge. The hawk took him to a branch and feasted while we watched. Lesson: Changes in landscapes benefit some and are a disaster for others. Have good insurance.

While I was resting in my yard chair, I looked up and noticed a hummingbird flitting from branch to branch in one of the remaining trees. It is rare to see them land but the silhouette of the long beak and the blur of the wings as it moved quickly made for good identification. I was so excited to know my tree could provide a place of rest
and I caught a glimpse during its rest and mine. Lesson: Sit and rest and look up every now and then to enjoy the sights.

It is a new year and I have so much to be grateful for. The smoldering fire from the burning stumps reminds me of wonderful camping experiences. The sunlight on the solar roof panels will give me inexpensive hot water. I will be able to grow vegetables again. I will have different wildlife visit my transformed yard. And, I continue to learn lessons from the wild each day I can experience it.

Best wishes for a healthy, safe and wonder filled New Year.

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