

Beginner's Luck

My Big Little Grow

By Jan Chaffin February 17, 2024

I think they've been stolen. Bummer!

No, look closer. They're small.

Sure enough, hidden among the little succulents on my front porch were two *tiny* pot plants—a 65th Birthday gift from a friend of a friend.



The Babies!

I had mixed feelings. It had been 25 years since I'd last grown pot and back then I'd had help. When she told me she was dropping them off, I tried pawing them off on a grower friend to no avail.

But now that I saw the helpless, healthy, hopeful little four-leaved green beauties, I couldn't resist. I couldn't just let them perish; they needed me. I knew the next six months would be an organic odyssey. What I didn't know is how much those two plants would touch me, what a gift they would give.

I'd be obsessive and throw lots of money, science and energy into the effort. But I also decided early on not to get too attached to the outcome, to try and make this a learning experience.

What follows is the story of my big little grow last summer, filled with lots of discoveries, sudden ups and downs and hopefully some helpful advice, but mostly filled with a bounty of beginner's luck.

Part One - Indoors

My first journal entry on ***April 22, 2023***:

Ellen gave me two sativa plants. Ally brought over. NO idea how to grow them. Ginger + Jane? Ginger + Trixie? Aurora + Stella?

My second journal entry the next day consists of a shopping list of supplies:

Moisture stick

Mister

2 pots (1 gallon each)

Soil

Miracle Grow



Indoors

I left them outside the first few nights then panicked and brought them back in. My new plan was to move them outside in transportable pots once they'd reached a certain size. I had several outdoor issues including not enough light in one area all day, privacy and gophers. There was no way I could put them in the ground. I'd watched an entire beloved easter lily disappear underground in less than five seconds.

My dear friend Kay, who was a veteran grower, counseled me tremendously. I think it was fun for her to relive her growing days vicariously. Soon after I moved them outside, she sent me a very helpful book (bright pink!) called Growing Weed in the Garden by Johanna Silver. I bought one of that author's sources also as a supplement. It is called Feminist Weed Farmer: Growing Medicinal Medicine in Your Own Backyard by Madrone Stewart – a step-by-step guide to outdoor growing that I found to be excellent.

Between these references and my grower friend Ellen plus various other growers' advice and internet research, I decided on a strategy and timeline. I would use my skylight and fans to start, then move to the open window and skylight in the bathroom in bigger pots before

exposing them to the perils of the outdoors where they would ultimately spend what I hoped to be months of their lives.

Since this was my first attempt, I decided to keep the science to a less fancy minimum. I would purchase the most PH suitable soil I could find (Fox Farm Ocean Forest with PH 5.8-6.2-slightly acidic. Mix was silt, sand, clay 40/40/20). But I wouldn't attempt to regulate the PH of the water. My cousin suggested letting water sit for 24 hours so I did.

On April 24, I repotted the plants (I think I redid one replant twice in a row) and worried I'd overwatered them. I had purchased a moisture stick but didn't know what the reading should be. One source said like tomatoes which were about 2-3 on the meter. I was still keeping them indoors and obsessively monitoring them for soil and leaf conditions. I kept a small oscillating fan on a timer - on/off 15 minutes during the day.

I queried my grower friend who had indirectly gifted them to me. What are they? Do you know? Are they clones? From seeds? I needed to set my expectations. She'd alluded to them being both tasty sativas but she admitted unless they were labelled she didn't know the strains. She did know they were not clones.



My journal entry from **May 8** was optimistic. Since being transplanted into one-gallon pots, the two plants had grown rapidly.

The two plants seem to be thriving in their one-gallon pots. They smell like marijuana now. Lovely pungent scent. They have five crisscrossing sets of leaves, starting on their sixth. Don't think they are ready for bigger pots yet.

Weather and work keep them inside days below pod skylight with timed oscillator fan during day, out for an hour if weather allows then in upstairs bathroom by open window at nights. I feel happy and calm when I'm near them.

My friend Kay sent me plant food with B1. On Sunday May 21st, I treated them with a tiny amount added to water in the morning and evening. Some of the bottom leaves were turning yellow and I was a bit concerned I was overwatering. Everything I read said that is more likely than underwatering especially at the start of their lives.



Plant Foods

Kay and I conjectured on the early signs of buds or balls. I knew if they survived the first few weeks, they would start speeding through growth stages into adulthood. There was only so large a window to separate males from females. First, I had to determine which was which.

They were growing. I started thinking of transplanting and then moving outside. I also started thinking of ways to stake them up.

Part Two – Outdoors

On Monday May 29, I left them outside for the first time since they were tiny. I noticed brown spots on a few leaves the next day, so I decided to back off the B1 fertilizer. As June arrived, I noticed more spots on one plant even after stopping fertilizer. On June 3rd, I gave them a good soaking until they were 3-4 on the meter.

(WHEN WERE THEY transplanted to biggest planters?)



Outdoors

(WHEN were they staked up – and when were outside tomato cylinders started?)



Every afternoon after work, I'd rush home and sit with them, just staring at how lovely they were, just watching the changes. I'd move them around the yard chasing the sun.

By June 5th, I was starting to get a suspicion one plant might not be female although I knew zero about sexing a pot plant. I decided one might be a hermaphrodite (containing both seeds and buds) and the less vibrantly green and healthy-looking one was female. I decided to separate them for the night. Feeling guilty at isolating them and reading about typical seasonal timing, I rejoined them the following day. Apparently, I had a bit of time before the male would be able to

pollenate the female. I just didn't know how much. I had made a pact early on that I wouldn't kill either of them.

But everything I read said they MUST be completely isolated, or the male will seed the female and essentially ruin the crop. Not only will the buds be filled with seeds, but she will lose interest in flowering once she's pollinated.

I find it fascinating that marijuana is one of the few plants where the female can self-flower without help from a male plant. His imperative is to spread his seed so he will continue his lineage. Hers is to flower and bloom. Completely at odds with each other. Yet somehow, I wanted to satisfy both their imperatives. But how?!

Even though I was mostly in it for the experience, I couldn't deny part of me wanted to see beautiful buds! Pragmatically, I also wanted seeds and pollen and was planning on brushing a branch with pollen dust anyway and collecting pollen for next year to repeat the process.

June 11 was a decisive day. I discovered what I believed to be a male "ball" on an upper branch of my female. I declared her a hermaphrodite and sighed with despair.

So, what were the options? I could sterilize tweezers with alcohol and pluck each little "ball", destroy it, then dip the tweezers in water. If I kept her alive and she yielded seeds, I'd be preserving a lineage of undesirable hermies.

But I couldn't kill her. I'd made a promise. Plus I was quite attached to both of them, although now less to the handsome, healthy, thriving solid green male because of his threat. I reminded myself I'd also promised not to get too attached to the outcome.

The next day I decided to write about the experience no matter what happened.

Soon after, I separated them. I moved him to the side yard where he got sun and was hidden with a fence between him and her.



Isolated Male

At that time, I sterilized tweezers and plucked what I thought were balls, apologizing to her if they weren't. I used Dad's jeweler's optivisors to check every branch and bud.

On June 20th, my grower friend came over to check the plants. She believed one was female and one was male. She cut a top branch to get the female to split and grow more flowers. I didn't quite follow how she chose where to cut. The pink book also explains the process but I find it confusing if you're not a gardener. She wanted to go further down but I

asked her not to. It wasn't about big yield I said. Already I was a possessive, fretting plant mother!

The following weeks were a roller coaster of highs and lows as I dramatically swung between ecstatic assurance and gloomy doubt. I followed a pattern of feeding and watering that I constantly questioned. But the kids were still growing.





Mature Rose Bud!

The basic strategy I used was adding high nitrogen organic fertilizer until late July then switching to high phosphorous organic fertilizer. There are two main periods: grow and flower and the plant has different needs accordingly.

I commented to my friend Kay how expensive these “free” plants were to bring through their cycle and she responded that a quick way to

lower costs is to double the yield. I liked that answer. Next year, I'd try to grow a couple more.

As they grew, the breezes became a concern. I tried draping burlap over sections of the yard to abate the wind. Once the plants grew stronger, I loosely tied them with fuzzy tie wraps to bamboo stakes and removed the barriers. I'd move them from location to location, so they'd get as much sun as possible.

The girl was developing some beautiful buds and still growing each day. I sat next to her mesmerized. The aroma was so sweet. I'd read a suggestion in the pink book to plant scented flowers nearby for flavoring the terpenes. I gave up in the idea and was content on just keeping her near the lovely old Cecil Brunner roses. I tentatively decided to call the harvest Rose Bud.

On July 15, I fed the plants the grow formula for the last time. By July 21st, the male was growing some obviously big balls. The next day, I went crazy with the tweezers and removed all his balls except one branch hoping to limit his pollination if he did get to her. I realized this was a somewhat impossible task soon. Every day, he sprouted more big-ole balls and kept growing in all directions.

I started reading up in the pink book about how to collect pollen to dust a branch of the female. I wasn't sure I would, but I wanted the option.

Soon after, I noticed the male had yellow powder near the balls. He was pollinating and I had to move him. First, I collected some of the pollen as best I could. Then, I apologized to him and sequestered him upstairs. I knew he would no longer thrive, but he was soon going to become too much of a threat to keep near her. He was placed in the upstairs bathroom with a black tarp under him to collect all the pollen.

The pink book said to remove a few mature polluting branches, put in a paper bag, shake then strain the pollen into an airtight container and place in the freezer.

By now I was worrying about the coastal dampness in the evenings with the female. I started reading about different molds and issues and contemplated adding pesticides but decided against it.

I couldn't tell if the crystals I was seeing were desired trichomes or deadly fast-spreading mold. I took photos and decided to visit my local friendly garden store - The Garden Company on Mission Street. Lance took one look and started laughing. He said the plant looked very healthy and those were pot buds I was seeing not mold. I was embarrassed but enormously relieved. He advised me to tuck her under a shelter at night to avoid dew,

Still, the timing of the harvest was critical. Too soon and the buds wouldn't be mature, tasty or strong. Too late, and they could potentially mold or lose the better qualities of the high. The hairs were supposed to be golden to brown. I decided to harvest different branches at different times as they seemed ready (or due to mold, necessary). Meanwhile, I continued to pluck anything that looked like balls and was sure I saw a branch or two with seeded buds yet was determined to harvest her/them regardless. I was starting to battle some mold for real-grey powdery buds, so I plucked those as well.

I started thinking ahead to how and where I would dry the harvest. I decided the garage would be the best place and I would need to cover the skylights with black tarps. I could string a rope across the garage above the couch and hang hangers of branches with labels on the rope.

I also started researching the ideal temperature and humidity for the harvest space.

Harvest should happen at pre-dawn. 60-75 degrees with 50-65% humidity. I purchased a very inexpensive analog moisture and temperature meter. Now it was just a waiting game...

By September 10, the male plant had succumbed. I thanked him and told him he had achieved his life's imperative - he had pollinated a female and left seeds and pollen behind for future generations.

I set up the garage making it the right darkness, wetness and coolness using a timed fan and a constant dehumidifier. Half the stigmas had died back, turned brown and the trichomes were turning amber, so I decided the next morning would be my first harvest!

Part Three - Harvest

At 5:30 am on Monday September 11 (Dad's BD) I harvested the first five branches. I felt a little sad because it was the end of the line for her, a few branches at a time and I felt like I had betrayed her although she had fulfilled her destiny as a plant-she flowered and became pollinated. Only the most mercenary mind could feel differently. I wasn't quite sure where to cut so I cut an inch or so from the stalk then dabbed the wound with alcohol. I hung the branches in the dark garage on a metal clothes hanger by their own off-shooting stems with their date of harvest written on a plastic tie wrap and attached to the hanger. All five branches fit on one hanger. Since I only had one strain, I didn't label the variety – now officially named Rose Bud!

I monitored the temperature and humidity and adjusted fans etc. each day morning and evening and planned to keep them in the dark climate-controlled garage until all the branches snapped cleanly from the stalk. It was time to start procuring glass jars, clippers and individual

moisture packs. I ended up also using these wonderful Joyce Chin red handled clippers that I also use to cut sterling silver.

On Wednesday September 13, I harvested seven more branches due to encroaching mold and noticed that some buds had seeds for sure. I charted out the timetables for each set of harvested branches, planning drying times of 10-14 days. But it was turning out differently. The plants were drying more quickly, perhaps because of their diminutive stature, so the chart contained theoretical and actual harvest dates. I started listing who to give them to and came up with at least five friends. A sense of calm pride came over me. At least these branches would see their intended outcome-cured in jars to be stored, savored and restored.

On Saturday, September 16 (a dear friend Jean's BD), I harvested five more branches. (Spoiler alert- these turned out to be some of the stickiest, strongest and most enjoyable buds of the harvest!)

The next day, I took down the September 11 branches and carefully trimmed them inside. I stored them in two jars in the garage and planned to sample no earlier than two weeks from now. I'd be burping the lids daily to ensure they didn't mold. Sometimes, I'd leave the lid off for several hours, then reseal. They smelled delicious and were sticky with beautiful trichomes. I was beyond happy with the results. The buds were small but so full of appeal.



On Monday, September 18, I harvested two more branches and upped the moisture from 50% to 55% to slow the drying a tad. I turned the fan times down a tad. On the 19th, I cut and jarred one 9/13 plant. The next day, I jarred at least three more jars' of 9/13 buds. I also backed off the dehumidifier – turned it and the fan off for two days then resumed on low intermittent levels.

On Friday September 22, I harvested 1 of the 9/13 branches (a dear friend Ally's 65th BD!). On September 23, I jarred two more branches from 9/16. I got the idea that day to do a pot flip book of the growing stages with tips on care at each stage. On September 24, I cured four branches from 9/16-the nicest yet! On the 25th, I harvested one branch. Kay's knee surgery was today. I saw a beautiful dragonfly dancing in my back yard that day. Personally meaningful events and milestones guided the entire process.

On the 26th, I smoked the first bud from the first branch from 9/11. My journal entry says:

Smoked 9/11 – YUM!!! First smoke!!! It's sticky, smelly, pretty, delicious and stoney!!!

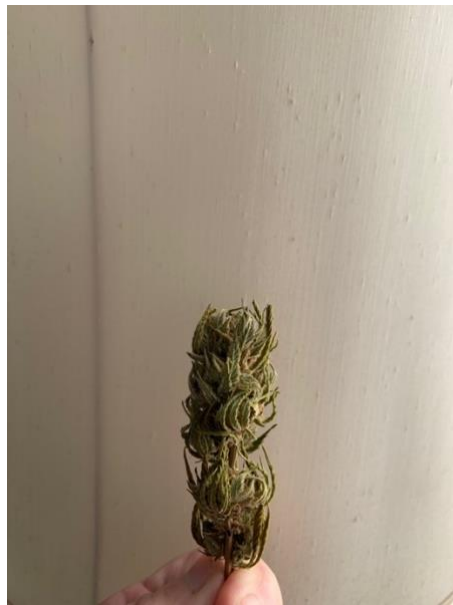
It turned out, not many buds had seeds, but enough did to collect for next year. That same day, I cured two branches from 9/18. On Sunday,



October 1, I cured the 9/22 branch. The buds were so beautiful I took pictures of them.

On Monday October 2 (dear friend Gail's BD), I harvested most of the last branch. Dear Rose Bud was a mere stalk. I moved the male out with his branches still intact, albeit dead. I placed them near each other and thanked them for the amazing adventure we'd had together.

My friend Kay and I have discussed cultivating and smoking pot for years. Before I met her, she and her recently deceased life-partner were arrested for growing on a roof in Berkeley. They also had crops stolen by neighbors. After many seasons, they became very cautious, growing only indoors until recently ceasing altogether. I'd grown once before years ago and came close to having about 20 plants nabbed by a nosy neighbor when almost mature then nearly discovered by a nosy landlord while drying.



The legal climate has since changed but the paranoia persists. I had been as discrete as possible but was questioning how I could realistically grow more than a few plants at a time in the future.

Kay told me recently that she'd rather die sooner smoking pot than die later miserable without it. She'd prefer 'death by pot', as she put it. She also told me how gratifying it was to feel purposeful helping me grow pot.

Since the risks of inhaling marijuana have not been officially studied due to the lack of federal legality, we each must weigh the potential risks versus perceived rewards. I smoke pot to feel calm, uplifted, to create, accomplish, relax, and to generally experience a heightened connection with my external and internal worlds. But it's not for everyone.

It's now February 2024. I still have one jar of Rose Bud left after giving most of the buds from the single plant away and savoring the remaining jars for several months. Smoking pot that I grew myself (with lots and lot of help from friends) has been very gratifying. I'm looking forward to trying to start Rose Bud's seeds from scratch in a couple of months so their legacy will continue.