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The Garden of Science

It's summertime, and I've been thinking a lot about gardens. Nearly 30 years ago, when my husband and I bought our home, the small back yard was a strange mixture of a grass lawn, a day lily patch that bloomed for one glorious week per year, azaleas, oak trees—some healthy, some nearly dead—and crumbling terraces for smaller plants. During the next phase of life, the dead trees came down, the lily patch was replaced by a swing set, and the highest spot on the lawn became my son's pitching mound. Today, there's no lawn at all, trees that were planted when my children were young stretch far into the sky, and a winding path runs through what is now a shade garden. Nothing stays the same for very long. The acidic contributions of three large dogs create additional challenges to keeping the garden lush. If the past is any indication of the future, the new young raspberry bush I just planted in the male dog's favorite spot doesn't have a chance. But, I remain hopeful, and will do my best to see that it survives whatever may come.

Reading the newspaper each morning can make it difficult to be optimistic about the current direction of US science. Day after day, we read about possible significant budget cuts to science agencies, while at the same time learning about the enormous chunk of Antarctica's Larsen C ice shelf that just broke free, the mass bleaching of corals, and the many wildfires that are burning vast acreage in the western United States and elsewhere around the globe. Confronted with these disheartening developments, it may be helpful to think about the US scientific enterprise as a garden that thrives with the proper amounts of sun and rain, and at other times suffers from drought or neglect. The scientific landscape has changed many times over the years with shifting personnel, policies, and priorities. It's not new for Congress to cut science budgets, nor for an Administration to challenge scientific research. It's not new for politically appointed agency heads to reconsider science-based regulations. It's not new for an Administration to weigh (or ignore) science based on economic or political interests. In times like these, it is more important than ever that we not neglect the scientific garden, that we continue to nurture it as best as possible, so that when the time is right, it will come into full bloom once again.



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