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Gee Book is New Gardener's Mentor

**The Massachusetts Gardener's Companion: An Insider's Guide to Gardening from the Berkshires to the Islands by Barbara Gee (Globe Pequot Press, 2007)
Madeleine Charney Granby, Mass.**

Are you a new gardener living in Massachusetts? Have you ever wished a good friend would show up to teach you must-know facts and guide you through the complex decisions involved in gardening? Well, Barbara Gee's book is that friend. The writing is clean and straightforward without being dry, providing a navigable roadmap for gardening with ecological sensitivity and consideration for the diverse conditions of the Bay State. Early on, Gee reminds the reader that, "Gardening is an act of collaboration between you and Mother Nature...if you want the collaboration to be fruitful, it helps to know with whom or what you are dealing." These spirit-oriented comments, sprinkled liberally throughout the book like compost on the garden, cast a magical light onto the art of gardening. But complementing this artistry, you'll also find plenty of good, hard science.

The first section of the book is aptly entitled, "Firm Foundations" as she offers in-depth context-the historical geography of the state. Concisely she describes how the state's glacial till is the result of the most recent ice age: "Dipping your hand into your soil is literally touching prehistory." This basic background reminds the neophyte gardener of the usefulness of starting at the beginning, before diving into the upper world of plants. What follows is a brief overview of soil chemistry, testing and improvement. Regarding improving the soil, she offers only natural solutions. However, readers will need to seek information from additional sources as, for example, only one paragraph each is devoted to cover crops and animal manures.

Site analysis is covered step by step, including zones, range of growing season, topography, orientation, airflow, wind, microclimates, drainage, existing plants, views, property lines and utilities. These are basic elements often overlooked by even seasoned gardeners. Simple distinctions are made without condescension, such as explaining the difference between weather and climate and the fact that city gardens tend to be several degrees warmer than rural gardens. Her approach is Socratic at times, asking the reader reflective questions, "Is your property on a steep hill? Is it gently sloping?" By this method, she invites gardeners to think carefully before making decisions large and small.

Gee emphasizes water conservation, with suggestions such as rain barrels, including irrigation zones in your design, choosing plants with minimal water needs, mulching and creating berms around plants. Perennials get moderate coverage, along with a plant list, whereas for annuals, this book does not provide encyclopedic information and you'll want to supplement with additional material. The section on vegetable gardening discusses labor- and space-saving methods such as crop rotation, succession planting, interplanting and companion planting, with an example or two in each of these categories. Chapters on Trees and Shrubs, Lawn, and Invasive Plants are welcome additions, filling out the broader landscape around a successful home garden. The range of solutions for pests and diseases are mostly natural and based on Integrated Pest Management (IPM). Because she is not a purist, there is the recommended careful use of Rotenone, a biological poison requiring a state permit when used near wet areas. The last chapter looks at city and seaside gardens, which she groups as "Special Challenges."

Throughout the text are pithy insets covering topics such as: rain data; Massachusetts Horticultural Society; cool-season grasses; plants for small gardens; and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). She frequently quotes from gardening experts, all of them Massachusetts based, passing along their wisdom and promoting their businesses by name. The black-and-white graphics are folksy and well distributed, though a few splashes of color would add to the brilliant world she mirrors with her words. The end carries a helpful glossary, a thorough index, and an excellent resource list including lesser-known public gardens.

As a Massachusetts resident for nineteen years and an avid gardener for the last twelve, I appreciated the "homey" feeling that I experienced while reading Gee's book. Her work is a gift to new gardeners as well as a gift to the earth.

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This page was last modified on May 24, 2007 at 8:20:23 AM.

Northeast Organic Farming Association, Massachusetts Chapter
411 Sheldon Road | Barre, MA | 01005 | (978) 355-2853 | nofa@nofamass.org

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