

Outsmarted by a Squirrel

Because I'm a former math teacher, you may wonder, "What could he possibly know about gardening?" Well, the answer is, not much. However, I have developed an appreciation for gardens. I enjoy the outdoors, love to see and listen to birds, and have thought I could be effective in terrorizing squirrels. If those seem like incompatible virtues, I'll explain.

SINCE MY CHILDHOOD IN NEARBY NILES, I have always appreciated nature. I joined the Boy Scouts, and absolutely adored camping. Following college, summers were spent backpacking and mountain climbing throughout the western United States. Experiencing the natural beauty and rhythms of the environment calms my nerves and refreshes my soul.

Last spring, while enduring an event-filled day at work, I was glancing out my office window and saw three things: a patch of ground filled with weeds, five or six birds digging for worms, and a frisky squirrel flaunting a devious smile. I ignored the squirrel, listened to the birds and thought about the weeds. The next Saturday, the Boy Scouts were having a nearby plant sale. I donned my old jeans, grabbed my shovel, bought some plants from the Boy Scouts and attacked the weeds. Hours later, I had a nice flower garden. It was wonderful working outside that day, creating something beautiful in a spot so long neglected. The sun was shining, the birds were singing and that squirrel was sitting in a tree still giving me the evil eye.

The next Monday, colleagues paused to admire our new little garden. A few days later, co-workers donated plants from their homes, and the small space slowly grew into a community project. A beautiful little landscape began to emerge just outside my window.

Late in the summer, I stopped there to prune a few flowers while listening to the morning birds. But something was missing. After a quick trip to a nearby home and garden center, I returned with

a metal pole and two bird feeders, which I erected and filled with seed. Within 10 minutes, the garden was alive with birds; there was music in the air; the sun was shining and all was right with the world. "Gary the Pesky Squirrel" (as I later named him), watched my every move.

By afternoon, the bird feeders were empty. "Wow," I thought, "those birds were hungry." No problem. I refilled the feeders and reverted to the office to answer e-mail.

As I looked up to see the birds fleeing the feeder, I saw Gary the Pesky Squirrel climbing the pole toward the food supply, where he quickly devoured the seed. I ran from the office and chased Gary away. As he scampered up a nearby tree, he glanced back with that smile. You can chase a squirrel all afternoon, but it quickly became clear he was just toying with me.

But man is clever, too. Right? I revisited the store to buy "anti-squirrel seed" recommended by the salesperson before returning to the office to refill the empty bird feeders. Life was again good. Man's logic and planning had foiled the simple beast. Two hours later, the feeder was again empty.

Gary the Pesky Squirrel was perched in the branches with a satisfied smirk. Evidently, no one told Gary that squirrels don't eat "anti-squirrel birdseed." If you are keeping score, it's squirrel 6, superintendent 0. And so it went all winter.

The flowers had withered, but the birds and Gary provided moments of amusement despite the gray days. When leading a school system was

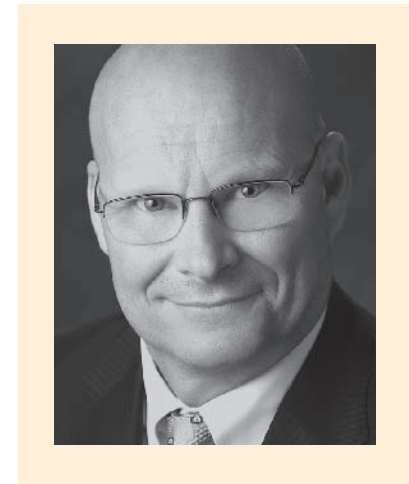


PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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hectic and complicated, I would look out the window, enjoy the birds and wave to Gary.

Squirrels can sometimes be destructive pests, but my bushy-tailed rival has taught me a few positive lessons. The importance of being persistent is one, followed by a new admiration of this squirrel's dexterity, ingenuity and resourcefulness – all good attributes for a public school district to emulate in trying times.

Early spring is often the hardest for squirrels because the nuts and seeds they bury in the winter begin to sprout and are no longer available to eat. Given the uncertainty of funding our school district once counted on from state provisions, I can sympathize.

I no longer begrudge Gary the few kernels he stores away from the birdfeeder.

As the days get longer, plants poke from the soil, trees show their buds, birds return, and the sun shines again. And Gary the Pesky Squirrel is still eating well. Thanks to my friend, I now appreciate the assortment of nature in the modest garden outside my office window.

I hope you, too, find a reason to enjoy this new springtime and all it offers. U