

## Garden Personality Test Created by Craig Cramer

No two gardeners are exactly alike. People garden for different reasons. They use different methods. They have different 'tastes'. And different experiences satisfy their gardening desires.

In her book *The Inward Garden* (1995, Little, Brown and Company), Julie Moir Messervy describes several different types of gardeners. She points out three types determined by their attitude about altering their land:

- **The Preservationist** who is repelled by the thought of pulling a weed or pruning a shrub.
- **The Workhand** who loves to change the elements of a site.
- **The Artist** for whom the land is a canvas that speaks & directs what to do.

She also observes these two types:

- **Dirt gardeners** who garden with their hands.
- **Mind gardeners** who garden in their heads.

There is much truth in Messervy's observations. But I couldn't help thinking that there was more to it than that, and that even her personalities interacted. Inspired by the Myers-Briggs personality test, I thought that we might be able to designate several traits of gardeners that we could then gauge with a series of forced-choice pairs. Then we could look at combinations of those traits to give us a revealing portrait of the gardener. (Some of those gardening traits might even be tied to Myers-Briggs personality types, but that's another line of research all together.)

Messervy's test distinguishes between these traits:

- Reserved vs. Expressive
- Practical vs. Conceptual
- Principled vs. Personal
- Orderly vs. Relaxed

**The traits.**

While they aren't as basic to our core beings as the Myers-Briggs personality traits, I was came up with several that interested me. (Keep in mind that most of us are a mix of the traits in each pair):

**1. Relationship with nature: Conqueror vs. Naturalist**

This first trait has to do with the **gardener's perception of and relationship to nature.** By definition, no garden is '100-percent natural.' A garden is a place where we intervene with natural processes. At one end of the spectrum is the Naturalist who seeks to work closely with natural systems and uses nature as a guide in their garden. (Messervy's preservationist perhaps fits here.) At the other end of the spectrum is the Conqueror, who seeks to dominate the land.

A Naturalist might favor a diverse planting of native species to foster complex ecological relationships that minimize pest damage, benefit wildlife and improve the planet.

A Conqueror might prefer to grow monocultures of exotic plants that require much intervention and site modification to be kept free of pests, inside a wall that keeps out the wildlife.

<b>Conqueror</b>	<b>Naturalist</b>
Human order	Natural order
My vision	Nature's wisdom
Controlling	Spontaneous
Straight row	Sows and sows
Tea roses	Native plants
Topiary	Wildflower meadow
Shrubbery	Woodland garden
Deadheads often	Encourages reseeding
Eradicates weeds	Plants cover crops
10-10-10	Manure
<i>Myers-Briggs judging?</i>	<i>Myers-Briggs perceiving?</i>
<i>Messervy's workhand ?</i>	<i>Messervy's preservationist?</i>

## 2. Locus: Planner vs. Player

These traits closely match Messervy’s mind gardener (Planner) and dirt gardener (Player). **Planners garden mostly in their heads. Players garden mostly with their hands.** Often, Planners like *the idea of a garden* more than they like *to garden*. Some get involved by drawing up designs, fretting over seed and plant orders, and itemizing lists of garden chores. Others simply prefer to have a garden that someone else plants and maintains – or at least performs their least-favorite chores.

Players like to ‘just do it.’ There’s always something to do in the garden, and no chore is too tough or too dirty. Some may never actually sit down to catch their breath and enjoy their garden, and only smell the roses while they’re weeding around them.

Planner	Player
In your head	With your hands
Keeps records	Gets muddy
Product	Process
Does chores to achieve goals	Plays in the garden
Garden never looks as good as plan	Garden exceeds expectations
Low maintenance	Likes to putter
Right the first time	Moves plants often
Hired help	Do-it-yourself
<i>Myers-Briggs introvert?</i>	<i>Myers-Briggs extrovert?</i>
<i>Messervy’s mind gardener?</i>	<i>Messervy’s dirt gardener?</i>
	<i>Messervy’s workhand?</i>

## 3. Criteria: Engineer vs. Artist

Gardeners are faced with hundreds or thousands of decisions each season. For Engineers the overriding criteria is **what works**. For Artists, it’s what **looks good**. Engineers are more likely to focus on vegetables and other “useful” plants and don’t fret if they don’t look good, as long as they get the job done. Artists are more likely to focus on ornamental plants, fussing with color, texture and design to bring aesthetic visions to life in the garden.

Engineers build trellises to hold up vines, while artists view them as vertical design elements in the garden. Engineers build fences to keep things in or out. Artists may appreciate functional fences, but they've got to look good, too.

<b>Engineer</b>	<b>Artist</b>
Functional	Aesthetic
What works	What looks good
PVC trellis	Painted arbor
Harvests vegetables	Arranges cut flowers
Constructs walls and fences	Creates sculpture
Stakes tomatoes	Stakes peonies
High-yielding eggplant	Colorful eggplant
Wheel-hoe	Color wheel
<i>Myers-Briggs sensing?</i>	
<i>Myers-Briggs thinking?</i>	<i>Myers-Briggs intuition?</i>
<i>Messervy's workhand?</i>	<i>Myers-Briggs feeling?</i>
	<i>Messervy's artist?</i>

#### 4. Solitary Gardeners vs. Social Gardeners

I'm still trying to get a handle on this trait. It doesn't quite fit with the others, but it could be an important one in understanding how to reach gardeners with effective educational programs. Basically, does the gardener get more satisfaction from gardening on a personal level or from the social relationships that can be fostered through gardening.

For Solitary Gardeners, gardening is an intensely personal experience and their garden is their sanctuary. If no one else ever sees it, it's no big deal. For Social Gardeners, plants may be great but they are secondary to the relationships that the garden can help foster.

What's still hazy in my mind with this one is that there seem to be many components to this solitary vs. social trait, for example:

- Working: Some like to work alone, others with a buddy or crew.
- Sharing: Some may like to work alone but still take great joy out of entertaining in the garden or hosting tours to display their handiwork.
- Learning: Some may enjoy learning from or with fellow gardeners, while others prefer to learn on their own.

<b>Solitary</b>	<b>Social</b>
'I want to be alone.' Meditation garden Chair or stool Shops on the Internet Buys a book Garden wall	'The more the merrier.' Garden party Bench or patio Shops at nursery Attends workshop Garden buddy
<i>Myers-Briggs introvert?</i>	<i>Myers-Briggs extrovert?</i>

### **Before we move on ...**

Now, when you think back to the pairings in the test, you may be thinking to yourself, "So that's what that choice was getting at, whether I'm an engineer or an artist." That's easier said than done, because it's difficult to write questions that probe a single trait. It's also difficult to make the choices universally relevant to the experiences of each individual gardener.

At this point too it's necessary to point out:

- Most people are probably a mix of the two traits in each pairing. Some gardening tasks call for your engineering skills, others for your artistic sense. As with Myers-Briggs personality types, we tend to balance as we age, preferring one trait but still knowing when and how to use the other.
- In no case is one trait good and the other bad. No matter your traits, gardeners share a bond in that they love and value plants. On a long flight, I'd relish sitting next to a gardener with the exact opposite traits that I have compared to someone who cared nothing about gardening.

### **"Gardening Personalities"**

Leaving out the solitary vs. social trait for the sake of simplicity at this point, there are eight Gardening Personalities using different combinations of the other three traits.

I've outlined them below and given each a light-hearted title and treatment, **speculating** what each personality might be like.

### **1. Conqueror-Planner-Engineer: The Turf Manager**

With lawn being the epitome of the human-dominated landscape, grass is probably the favorite crop of the Turf Manager. The Turf Manager has a plan for regular mowing (with sharp blades), fertilizing and weed and pest control. Uses Scott's 4-Step Program or hires a competent lawn service. Dream job: Supervising Groundskeeper at Yankee Stadium.

### **2. Conqueror-Planner-Artist: The Rose Gardener**

No rose is too difficult to grow (or for the hired gardener to grow). Parterres and tightly trimmed shrubs provide the organizing principle, and the lawn is nicely edged around the beds. If also social, the Rose Gardener might be known for hosting garden parties that spill from the patio onto the lawn.

### **3. Conqueror-Player-Engineer: The Market Gardener**

You'll find the Market Gardener with muddy boots working from dawn 'til dusk growing great vegetables. The vegetable patch might not be pretty, but it's productive (the best commercial varieties), the rows are straight, the irrigation system works and the deer are fenced out. If there's an artist in the family, expect rock gardens, a constructed water garden, hardscaping and other nice physical features.

### **4. Conqueror-Player-Artist: The Cut-Flower Grower**

Expect dazzling displays of annual flowers and tropicals lovingly arranged by the Cut-Flower Grower (or perhaps for sale), perhaps a formal border, breathtaking containers, nicely shaped shrubs or topiary and a well-tended kitchen or herb garden.

### **5. Naturalist-Planner-Engineer: The Carefree Gardener**

A few weeds never hurt anybody (and in fact they can improve the soil), and you'll probably find some in the Carefree Gardener's garden along with some tasty heirloom vegetables and old fruit trees. (And some projects that got started but were never finished.) Not to worry. There is a plan, a method to the madness. This year's garden is OK and next year's garden will be even better. Carefree Gardeners may enjoy gardening and bringing in the harvest (and may be quite good at it), but they don't obsess over their gardens.

### **6. Naturalist-Planner-Artist: The Visionary**

Expect a well-designed, tasteful display of ornamentals that match and enhance the site. The garden is cohesive and works together as a whole (even the

vegetables seem to belong where they are planted right in with the flowers). The Visionary can see how all the parts fit together. If the site is shady, the Visionary will put in a woodland garden. Or if the site is dry and stony, the Visionary will build a rock garden. The Visionary keeps things from getting messy by keeping the garden manageable in size.

### **7. Naturalist-Player-Engineer: The Permaculturist**

The Permaculturist isn't afraid to play around with nature. Soil-building consumes much of the Permaculturist's energy. Expect edible landscaping (where the wildlife allows), chickens (or other animals), and interesting native plants each with a specific purpose in the landscape. The grass (if any) is long (or grazed) and the compost is well-tended. Many plants will die in experiments but the ones that take will thrive.

### **8. Naturalist-Player-Artist: The Druid**

The Druid is at one with their garden. Weeds may not be much of a problem because the plants collide and overlap – lush, beautiful but somewhat out of control. The plants are the stars in this garden, and the Druid is happiest when right in the thick of things, moving plants, trimming some, encouraging surprise seedlings – always in awe at it all.

### **So what?**

So I hope you've gained a little insight into why you might garden the way that you do. More importantly, I hope tools like this might help us gain insights into better ways of communicating and working with gardeners.

For example, if our goal is to get more gardeners to compost, "Recycle Naturally" might be a good selling point if our audience is mostly Naturalists. But if we're trying to reach Conquerors then "Turn trash into fertilizer" might work better.

Engineers might be attracted to a program that features different compost bin designs. Artists might come if we promise to help them find ways to tastefully incorporate the composting area into the landscape and point out that the end product will help them grow prettier flowers. The Planners probably want the handout with the carbon to nitrogen ratios of compost ingredients so they can plan the perfect pile. Players might come to a hands-on workshop where the group will build different composters or try out commercial products. The Solitary Gardeners might prefer to just view the composting resources online.

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