

GROK PLANT EXERCISE
DEEP GARDEN OBSERVATION
by Sherri Miller

Consider this: two identical greenhouses, same crop, same conditions, two different farmers.

The first farmer does not like his job. He resents having to take care of the plants.

The second farmer loves his job. He can't wait to get out there every day. He sees the mundane chores of watering and removing dead leaves as acts of love for beings, much like children, whom he loves very much.

The first farmer doesn't think of his chores as loving other beings; he thinks of them as work. He will splash water on plants just to get them wet. He will remove dead leaves only because he knows that if he can't sell them, he won't get paid.

Which greenhouse has the healthier plants?

Clearly, the loving farmer is going to have healthier plants. It does not matter whether plants can read human emotions and react to them, although they probably do. As scientific tools improve, scientific experiments increasingly show that plants respond to stimuli, including human interaction. The fact is that the loving farmer, doing the same chores, is giving plants better physical care. Your attitude drives your actions.

In order to have better health for your crops, you must treat them as living beings, with feelings, desires, and needs, not as mechanical widgets for food or profit. The realm of widgets is for industrial farms. That model is linear, extractive, and degenerative. It erodes life. We should strive to enhance life. The well-being of other living creatures on this planet directly affects our own.

To help you better understand your plants and be a more effective grower, try this exercise.

First, choose a subject. It can be an individual plant, one that has a problem, or one that looks content and happy. It could be a row of crops, a field, or your entire garden or farm, viewed as a single entity or system. However, it is best to start with an easy exercise and focus on a single plant.

Next, relax. Take a few slow, even breaths. If you notice any tension in your body, relax it. Anxiety and tension will interfere with your results. Now focus on your subject.

ENGAGE YOUR SENSES

VISION

What colors do you see? Can you notice different shades of green? Are the leaves shiny and reflective? Or do they seem to absorb light?

Notice textures, movements. Is something broken or out of place? What other life do you see among your plants? Spend some time in quiet visual observation.

SMELL

What do you smell? Can you smell the plants? Are there fragrances from flowers? Recent rain? Perhaps you can smell the soil. Does it smell rich and earthy? It might smell sharp or sour. This might indicate soil that is too acidic or alkaline. Moisture levels will change the smell, too. If too dry, it may smell dusty; too wet, and it may smell swampy. Smell can give you a sense of your plant's current environment. Plants respond to the aromas they pick up through their leaves. You are trying to get a sense of what your plant is experiencing.

TOUCH

Can you feel a breeze or a strong wind? Does the wind feel refreshing or irritating? If you touch the plant, what does it feel like?

HEAR

What do you hear? The wind? Water? Birds? What type of birds? Do you hear insects? What else do you hear?

TASTE

Taste can also be engaged here, but it is not always appropriate. You can taste your plant if edible. Pay attention to cues like salty, sweet, acid, sharp, and tannic. Does it taste like what you would expect, or does it seem 'off'?

For non-edible plants, you can crush a leaf and smell it to approximate taste. Smell and taste are strongly intertwined.

Many farmers assess soil by tasting it. (They don't eat it, just touch a finger to the soil and then to the tongue.) Many can estimate pH with practice. You can practice this skill by experimenting with acid and alkaline foods. Get to know how they feel in your mouth and which part of your mouth is involved. You can also taste different soils with known pH values. This exercise may encourage you to learn this skill.

FOCUS FULLY

Now, move your full attention to your subject. Notice everything you can about it. Take in all the environmental cues. Get an overall sense of what it feels like to be in the same place as your subject.

BECOME THE PLANT

Then, imagine being your subject.

Notice environmental factors, and then notice how they feel to you. Here are some questions to get you started.

Do you feel sunlight? Do you need more sun or shade?

Is your location warm or cold? Would you feel better if you were warmer or cooler?

Is it easy to breathe, or do you feel you are choking?

Is the air hot, cold, or just right?

Do you have moisture on your leaves, or do they feel dry? What about the moisture in the air?

Is the breeze comfortable, or does it burn? If there is no wind, does that feel stagnant or comfortable?

Think about the soil. Is it moist and comfortable? Too wet and choking? Dry and irritating?

Does the soil burn? Does it feel dead?

Can the soil life support your needs? Are creatures eating your roots?

Does the mulch on the soil feel suffocating or like a comforting blanket? Maybe you need a blanket.

Do other plants or objects block the light or air?

Do you need more protection from sun or the wind? Maybe you don't have enough sun or air.

What is your relationship to other plants? Maybe you are lonely or feel overcrowded. Observe other creatures in your environment: insects, birds, soil organisms. Notice how they make you feel.

Pay attention to what feels good and what does not. This isn't a quiz. There are no right or wrong answers.

It's building a relationship with the things you grow and nurture, learning what they are, when they are happy, and when they are not.

Don't make any judgments at first. Just observe what you can through your senses. Be aware. Feel. What feels like imagination is intuition. *Believe* what you experience here, even if only as a metaphor.

Once you have some good information on your subject, come back to yourself.

Before you end this exercise, take a moment to appreciate your subject. Think of something about your subject that you are grateful for. Project that gratitude to your subject. This is blessing them.

Whether or not the plant recognizes the blessing, you will treat it differently. With gratitude, your efforts will be more effective.

It's good to end a session like this with an appropriate word, such as amama or amen, or with a gesture like a bow or even a kiss, whatever feels right for you. You want a physical way to end the session.

Finally, take a moment to analyze what you have learned. Writing it down can be helpful. You should have new insights into what your plant needs and what makes it happy, or what makes it suffer. Did you find a problem you didn't know about? What else did you learn?

Repeat this exercise whenever you have a problem or simply want to show your plants that you appreciate them. The more you appreciate them and love them, the better they will grow.