



Issue 35, May 2023

Hi Steve r,

I hope you're having a wonderful spring! Birds are shining and the sun is singing. (Pretty sure I use that joke every year.) I've been enjoying a return to more typical weather after a much needed, but unusually wet winter. The backyard is looking fresh with blossoms everywhere and my wife just planted tomatoes a few weeks ago.

I recently made a simple garden bench and in the video, I briefly showed off what I call my wife's "Discovery Garden." It's an area in the lower part of our backyard that has served many purposes over the years. When we moved here in 2001 it was overgrown with horrific waist-high weeds; those spiteful kinds — Death Weeds. The ones that spontaneously grow anywhere and are protected by medieval spiky things that will pierce pant legs and work gloves. They evolved with a deep-rooted hatred toward humans.

We cleared the Weeds from Hell and the first thing I did was build a sandbox for my son, who was 4 at the time. I made it out of pressure-treated lumber with a large, hinged plywood lid to prevent it from

becoming a litterbox for neighborhood cats. The box suffered from a big problem, though. I had placed it in the furthest, hottest corner of the yard; an area with no shade which required walking over a large patch of dusty earth and persistent weeds. I think he played in it about three times. Within a year, it was just attracting bugs and spiders so I tore it apart. It was built fine, but inappropriate for the environment.

I decided the entire lower yard needed a complete makeover. That was when, as a newish homeowner, I discovered books, blogs, and websites (pre-YouTube) devoted to landscape design. Not only that, I learned about ponds. With this new obsession, I designed and built a way-too-ambitious — and dare I say, ridiculous — garden. I wanted Disneyland with no experience in building a theme park.

I used a jackhammer to remove a concrete ramp to the upper yard and built natural steps out of large stones. I dug through a massive amount of clay soil to create a pond, complete with a second pump that pulled water up to a waterfall feature and into a winding brook in the upper yard that splashed back into the pond.

I learned about plants and ground cover. I planted a queen palm and I created a bog that grew papyrus (I made paper with it once). I built a curved wooden fence with a wide gate to separate the “tropical” garden from the vegetable garden. I installed lighting, a sound system, and ran new outdoor outlets with switches in my shop to operate everything. I learned about drip irrigation and installed a programmable timer in my crawlspace. I ran web water pipes to the garden and installed a French drain. I hauled truckloads of dirt, gravel, rocks, and boulders.

It turned out...nice. One thing I wasn't adequately prepared for was the continual maintenance. And since this was my first attempt at most of these constructions, they all had problems. The waterfall and river had a tendency to leak water when they were running, so after a few hours, I would have to top off the pond. The pond was too close to the fence, making it exceedingly precarious to get around to the electrical box or the water filter which required cleaning every few months. The gate began to sag because I mixed and poured the concrete footers

incorrectly. The bog became invasive and required constant pruning. The fussy tropical plants I selected were always in need of special pampering because we don't live in the tropics. The list went on and on.

This whole endeavor was too ambitious based on my skills and experience. But the most sobering realization was that my entire design wasn't at all suitable for the environment. After a few years, I removed the pond and we used the area for some raised beds and a simple vegetable garden.

Finally, in 2021, we hired an experienced landscape designer to give our front and back yards a complete, integrated makeover. They eliminated any remaining lawn, built a patio, added some pathways, and most importantly, planted native, drought-tolerant desert plants appropriate to this area. Two years in and it's thriving, looks great, and requires very little tending to.

They left the lower yard alone so my wife could have a crack at realizing her own vision of that area. She installed raised beds for tomatoes and herbs, built a cat garden filled with catnip, catmint, lemongrass, and other plants that cats enjoy, and gradually added fun areas to explore. It's home to gnomes, windmills, and whimsical colourful ceramic lizards climbing the wall of the tool shed. She painted art on the fence and made a mosaic tile birdbath from old terracotta pots. Honestly, the Discovery Garden looks better and is far more interesting than my ego-driven, meticulously planned attempt to design a pristine urban botanical garden.



My contribution to the Discovery Garden was a bright orange “meditation bench” which rests under a wire archway of climbing jasmine. Last spring, I banged it together quickly without plans, only using hand-held power tools and 2x4s.



A few weeks ago, I decided to revisit the meditation bench project, but this time armed with a solid design and a proper set of plans. This version would be stained instead of painted, so I would pay close attention to grain patterns and concealing the fasteners. The key was focusing on precision. This version would be built with more than just “duct tape and dreams.”

By almost anyone’s assessment, this new bench looks “better” than the first one. The proportions are better and the stain looks great, but honestly, I’m not going to swap out the bright orange bench. That one is flawed, unique, quirky, and beautiful. It fits the Discovery Garden vibe. The new one looks more like a woodworking project. Not that there’s anything wrong with that! 😁



Detailed plans are a good idea for most woodworking projects, but they should exist only to complement a clear goal. My goal with the orange meditation bench wasn't really to build a bench, but to add a splash of color and provide a cozy place to sit and reflect. I built neither my garish tropical garden nor the recent garden bench with a meaningful goal beyond, "It'll look nice." Maybe before building things, we need to think beyond the end product.

My wife's goal with the Discovery Garden is far more intrinsic than what the garden will eventually become. There is no end product goal. Its value lies in its flexibility and the time spent outdoors planting, harvesting, and adding a funky whirligig or two.

Happy Mother's Day to all moms and mom figures! Thanks for keeping us grounded.

— Steve

NEW! Back Issues: If you can't get enough Notes From The Shop and want to check out previous issues, we now have them available [here](#). Let me know which ones you enjoyed the most!

Weekend Shop Project

The meditation bench! It's a really fun and easy project.

Download the free plans [here](#).

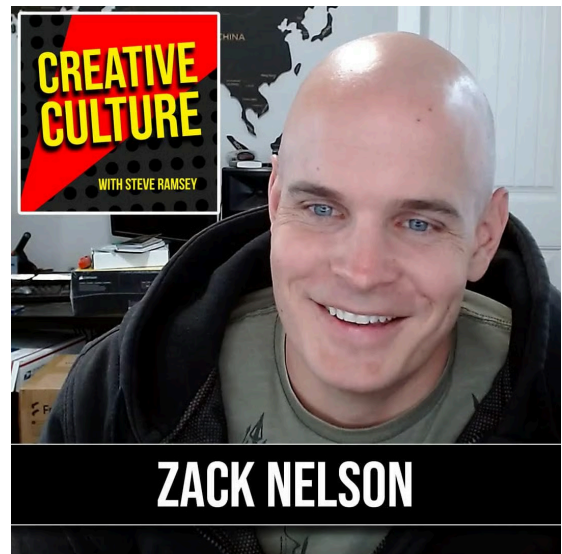


And [here's](#) the "site appropriate" orange one I slapped together last year.

Creative Culture Podcast

Can you actually repair a phone?

Zack Nelson is the creator of [JerryRigEverything](#), a YouTube channel mostly about technology. You've probably seen one of his many videos taking apart phones, testing their durability, or showing you how to repair them. Or maybe you've seen his videos on electric vehicles: he built his own electric Hummer.



Zack is also interested in accessibility issues and created an off-road electric wheelchair called the [Not-a-Wheelchair](#) and is developing a new, affordable manual wheelchair. Listen to the full episode [here](#).

Do you know where your water shut-off valve is?



Scott Dixon joined me to discuss his YouTube channel, [Everyday Home Repairs](#), which has detailed tutorials on how to fix just about anything in and around your house.

Ever wonder how to add an electrical outlet in a wall without access to an attic or crawlspace...and not rip apart the wall?

Do you have a crack in your concrete driveway that needs fixing or a faucet that won't stop dripping? Need to fix a stuck garbage disposal or learn how to install a new one?

And for god's sake, know where your water shut-off valve is! Listen to the full episode [here](#). His channel tackles everything from plumbing and electrical work to carpentry and remodelling, all with an eye on the DIYer.

Reader Mail

[Last month's issue](#) about my struggle to restore a chest of drawers (“completion anxiety”) struck a nerve with a lot of you. Thanks for your stories!

“I decided to renovate two chests of drawers that my father bought and put in my bedroom when I was still in elementary school, 25 years earlier. He passed away not long after bringing them home so they had real sentimental value but almost zero market value (he might have paid \$5 for the pair).

So I started on one of them and finished it. I was really pleased. The second one sat in various sheds, garages and storage units for 5 years after my divorce. Then, overcome with the feeling I was letting Dad down, I did the second one. It was close, but not close enough to the quality and look and feel of the first. I was incredibly disappointed. So much so that rather than take them with me when I emigrated, I gave them to my daughter.

So there they sit, six thousand miles away and I can forget about them. I do use them as a lesson on why I should finish projects so your newsletter really resonated with me.

Thanks,
Steve”

It's amazing how much emotional attachment we place on objects. I'll bet your dad would have never intended for you to feel burdened with furniture. — Steve

“I wanted to let you know that the “completion anxiety” you observe is a very common symptom of ADD.

It's common for those with ADD to exhibit the following pattern:

1. **Idea** – just pops into your head. This stage may last a while b/c you have to really grind up the idea before you can start. This also usually involves mentioning the idea to those around you because it feels so good to say it aloud. Your spouse/friends will get sick of hearing about it, often saying something like, “Stop talking and just do it already.”
2. **Project start** – this is really exciting, to the point that you actually start doing the project.
3. **Post-start slump** – realizing the project is more complex than you anticipated, you find lots of “Discovery Garden” things you have to look into more and “things you need to grab from Lowe’s” and other reasons you can’t keep working steadily. The spouse rolls his/her eyes a lot during this phase and starts to get irritated.
4. **Mid-project re-engage** – the guilt of not following through (again), letting down your spouse (again), and some excitement for the project itself leads you to get back to work. This is a productive period that could be as little as a few weeks after starting, or much later (e.g. more than a year).
5. **Late-stage foundering** – this is a (usually short) period when you get really anxious about truly finishing the project. You start thinking about tackling the finishing touches, doubting the success of the final outcome, grasping those last few loose ends that need tying, having to do all the cleanup and post-project tasks, and, frankly, dreading the post-completion letdown. This can be a little overwhelming, but you usually get through it.
6. **Completion** – what a great moment! You revel in the joy of getting something done, that doesn’t look half-bad, if you don’t say so yourself. You talk way too much about all the little challenges you overcame, all the other ways you could have done it, how well it turned out, and what a relief it is to be done. You desperately want your spouse to keep telling you how great it is and how much he/she appreciates it (even if you don’t normally think of yourself as needing a lot of external affirmation).
7. **Post-completion letdown** – well, the project is over, and let’s face it, it’s really just a bookcase. It holds books. It shouldn’t have taken

three months to complete. The finish is blotchy in a few areas. The bottom corner got chipped. You see some errant glue around a few joints. Some of the books are too tall for the shelves. You probably should have made doors for the bottom section. Visitors don't notice how much work you put into it. And now you (erroneously) feel like you have nothing to focus on. Is there another project you can work on to avoid having the clean up the garage?

This entire sequence is a nearly unbreakable pattern for us (yes, I am one of them). It's very hard for those without ADD to even imagine what this is like. After all, why would anyone feel disappointed when something is done? That should be the best part of the process!

Thanks,
Christy O.”

Thanks for that eye-opening letter, Christy. As you suggested, we don't want anyone to self-diagnose, but understanding this pattern may help people realize that others share the same struggle, and it might be worth chatting with a therapist. — Steve

Thoughts on this month's newsletter? Drop me a line by replying to this email!

Reader Projects

Great story and a beautiful California Casual Table!

“I am 77 years old. My adopted Indonesian grandson and I are doing these projects together. Getting wood in Indonesia is VERY different from in the U.S. I chose “kruing” wood from the island of Kalimantan (Borneo). The rough boards were not processed in any way and still had bark on their edges. It took us a week to cut and sand them into submission. We do not have a lovely planer like the ones we have seen on some YouTube videos. The boards are still of uneven thickness! Anyway, this design was very forgiving of our mistakes and we chose a Wood Honey finish. This table will be used on a new exterior 2nd-floor balcony from which we can see the mountains.” – Anita and Gilbert



Holy smokes! THIS is how ya make a Parlor Bookcase extra fancy!

“SO proud of this one! Plywood just wasn’t fancy enough (and it’s expensive!) so I repurposed some tongue and groove cedar boards from a wall we took down, resawed them, and made panels with mirrored grain for the carcass and the shelves. And then since I was already in fancy mode, I did a geometric inlaid pattern on the top. I glued the top trim on one board at a time, starting with the front one and

that seems to work pretty well. The back trim board isn't perfect, but no one is going to look closely at it. Finished with oil-based wipe on poly, buffed with a paper bag, and smooth as glass!" – Lindsay



I'm always a sucker for cat furniture!

“With inflation, I’ve had to curb my wood addiction. But! The wood fairies smiled upon me and I picked up this beat-up old thing on the side of the road and made it into a cat condo.

This one is cat approved!” – Mary Quintero



Have you made something you want over a quarter million people to see in next month's newsletter? Just hit reply and send me a pic!

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For Mere Mortals, 448 Ignacio Blvd. #237, Novato, CA 94949, United States