



How to Grow a Fern

An author finds that to weather the storms of life, she needs a willing companion

/by Elaine Best // illustrations by Timothy Banks

In the same way some people deal with stress by buying new clothes or pints of ice cream, I buy plants.

First, there was the cactus I received after a disastrous year at college. I named him Taco, and he became my good luck charm for the next four years. Then, I moved to Columbia from Ohio after graduation. I had just given up my dream of starting fresh by trekking to New England, and moving to the “armpit of South Carolina” had me very depressed and incredibly sweaty. My parents’ parting gift to me was Vinny the Venus flytrap. Unfortunately for Vinny, he was high-maintenance and couldn’t take tap water. Vinny died graciously and rapidly on the porch that summer, drowning in tap and neglect.

In Columbia, I moved into my own place and loved it. No one could stop me from belting out Dolly Parton’s greatest hits. Wearing sweatpants was considered business casual. If I ate a block of cheese for dinner, no one was there to stop me. But it didn’t take long for old feelings of resentment toward my career to drag me down. I hoped a new plant would fix it— maybe something exotic this time, too. Like a ficus. Or basil.

Days passed without luck. On a whim, my friends and I swung by a pet store. It happened to be adoption day, and Homeward Bound Rescue had rows of lonely dogs, looking up at us with sweet eyes. I saw an especially forlorn-looking dog near the end of the row, laying on the ground and completely alert. Her brow was furrowed, her whole forehead a sea of wrinkles, and her long, white legs stretched out before her. She resembled a Sphinx more than a dog.

I glanced at her name tag. Fern.

Fern didn’t make eye contact with me. She stared straight ahead as though willing herself to disappear from her cage, to cease to exist.

I felt that.

“Did you want to take a look at her?” one of the volunteers asked, coming up behind me and smiling. Two weeks later, I took home my new Fern. While she was a dog and not a plant, I figured she couldn’t be that different. To start, Fern enjoyed tap water. Or, at least she didn’t know what she was missing out on. Fern also expressed emotions, so I knew when she was hungry or thirsty.

Fern’s main emotion that spring, however, was fear. Terrible, shaking fear. When I first took Fern home, she froze in her tracks when she saw the three flights of stairs we’d have to take. I tugged on her leash. Her forehead wrinkled and she bowed away from me. I crouched down to her level and patted her head.

“Come on,” I said.

Fern gave me one of those *I’d rather be back on the streets than with you* looks and proceeded to jump through a nearby window. My heart sank as I imagined losing my first dog after owning her for less than an hour. I held tight onto the leash and peered over at Fern, who was sitting upright and staring at me with those forlorn eyes. I tugged on the leash, hoping she would jump back up again.

**Woman's Best Friend:**

Author Elaine Best lives with her dog, Fern, in Charleston, where she works as a publishing coordinator at Advantage | ForbesBooks. She has placed six times in the South Carolina Collegiate Press Association Awards, and most recently won the 2017 Emrys Journal Linda Julian Creative Nonfiction Award.

She blinked.

I bit my lip, my shoulders slumping in defeat. I swung my legs over the ledge and hopped into the garden below. She followed me through the row of bushes and back to the entryway. I looked down at her, and she looked up at me. It was those sad eyes, I think, that conned me into picking up my 42-pound Fern and carrying her up the three flights of stairs like a damsel in distress. Fern didn't seem to mind, and I half believed she'd planned it all from the beginning.

The stairs soon stopped being Fern's biggest issue. Spring in Columbia meant pollen was alive and thriving. We took turns sneezing back to one another, as though our noses were having a lovely conversation about the recent Gamecock season and my, weren't those Tigers just troublesome? Our noses were stuffy, making Fern's snores as gentle as a hurricane, and I had the bags under my eyes to show for it.

When we ventured outdoors, our allergy problems doubled. I thought Fern was ready to tackle the Riverwalk by the Congaree River. Up to that point, Fern had sat every time she saw another dog. Huskies to chihuahuas, Fern planted herself on the ground and watched them walk by. I hoped this adventure would illicit normal dog behavior from Fern. I'd have even accepted a joyous hump or two.

But Fern trotted along with her head down, tail unmoving. I was doubting my skills as a dog owner and wondered if I should exchange my Fern for a potted one. Fern walked off the trail and began the hunt for the perfect dumping ground. As a shy pup, Fern preferred complete privacy for her indecency, which meant I often had to bushwack through the wilds of Columbia. I stepped on a branch, making a loud crack. Fern whipped around, glaring at the offender under my foot, and then turned to stare at me.

"Just go potty," I said.

Instead Fern sat down in protest. I'd made a bad noise. A terrible noise. And now, I would pay. I tugged her leash, but she wouldn't budge. Mosquitos swarmed us. Fern stared, unblinking. For all she knew, a whole tree would fall on us at any second. The best way to fix the issue was to not deal with it at all and swelter in the heat.

After that, I decided maybe the outdoors wasn't for us. I thought a restaurant might be more Fern's speed, so we went to Grill Marks, where dogs are

allowed. Fern covered between my legs, and I had to drag her to our table, which she crawled under to hide. When a waiter brought Fern water, she slurped it, then accidentally stepped into the bowl and knocked it over. The noise scared her, and she ran under my chair, pushing it back a few inches, causing the burger I was eating to fall in my lap.

I didn't stop trying, though. We went for walks behind Target and befriended a mammoth dog named Shadow. I noticed that the more I made Fern try to enjoy life, the more I found myself finding a purpose in mine. Each day, I searched for jobs more aligned with what I wanted to do. I started trying new things. The first time I went out since my move was to Flying Saucer, and I took Fern with me. Once we sat down, Fern actually poked her head out at the crowd and wagged her tail. We may have sneezed only three times that night.

We still had our lingering fears. It soon became clear that Charleston needed to be my next move, which scared me to death. I was looking at a job application when I heard the light tapping of rain. Soon, loud, slamming drops of rain slapped against my windows. The wind from the storm scraped the branches of a nearby tree across the sides of my apartment, and the following thunder rang in my ears.

Fern, shockingly, was not a fan. Her ears perked back, she hopped off the couch and ran to my room. Sighing, I went to find her. "Fern?" I said. A tail poked out from under my bed. I knelt down and a pair of shiny eyes stared back at me. The thunder roared and the outline of Fern shook. I reached out my hand to grab her paw. "You're okay," I said. I squeezed her paw and we sat there until the storm ended.

I didn't know then, but a few months later, Fern and I would move to Charleston. I would love my job. Fern would bark for the first time. There would still be shaking and running when the thunder came, but we'd grown roots strong enough to weather the storms. 