

ome ownership is really fun. You get to worry about all the things you took for granted when you used to live in an apartment.

Neighbors causing you troubles? No problem. Pick up and move at the end of your lease.

Air conditioner not working? Easy. Call the maintenance people. They'll eventually send a crew out to take care of business.

Leak in the roof? Piece of cake. The landlord has to send someone out pronto to tackle that one.

Ahh, but home ownership forces you to take an active role in the upkeep and maintenance of your house. Murphy's law dictates that soon after moving in, some major system—air conditioner, electrical system, roof, or any one of a thousand others—will go “on the fritz.”

Once you have shelled out money to pay a qualified contractor to fix the problem, you will find yourself driving to the nearest home improvement center to locate one of their “How-To...” home maintenance guides. All the way, you'll be muttering, “How did that job end up costing so much? He was there for all of twenty minutes!” Don't worry, it becomes the homeowner's mantra.

After a year of home ownership and shelling out for repairs, my wife and I have forced ourselves to become fairly adept with “do-it-yourself” jobs. Electricity, plumbing, and carpentry don't frighten me nearly as much as they used to.

There are a few jobs we actually enjoy. For instance, I recently replaced our old, 1970's-style, carved, heavy, wooden front door with a handsome, straight-grained fir door featuring a fan shaped window. I found the whole project, from cutting and sanding to the final finish coat of varnish, quite relaxing. It was a welcom distraction from the computer, which seems to own my attention. Plus, the finished project looked really good. Our guests no longer feel inclined to don their leisure suits and present us with a six pack of Billy Beer.

My wife has adopted gardening. Each day, she walks around the local neighborhoods and checks out the landscaping adorning the neighbors' properties. She'll rush home and tell me, out of breath, about this house that boasts a stately southern live oak surrounded by azaleas and decorative grasses. A discovery like that will send us packing for the garden center the following Saturday morning. It seems our house needs a bit of work in the landscaping department.

People have sometimes joked that our lot looks a little like a sod farm. St. Augustine grass covers the entire front yard with nary a break, except for the concrete driveway. My wife's mission is to make the place look a little more homey. Even though our property looks like a bleak stretch of needing-to-be-fertilized turf grass, it has one redeeming oasis of plantings.

Four rose bushes stand in front of a set of living room windows. When we moved in, they were terribly overgrown—seemingly just a tangle of yellowed leaves, spent blooms, and thorny canes. Roses are some of the prettiest flowers to look at, so we did some serious rose research after we were settled in.

Our first results left us both confused and discouraged about the concept of rose ownership. Every resource we found said that roses require hard work to produce prized blooms. Hard work? How could that be? It seems like every Valentine's day there's more than enough roses to go around. They couldn't be that hard to raise if people can produce them by the millions.

We soon discovered that, in addition to fertilizing, spraying, and mulching, pruning is a very important thing for keeping roses healthy. To me, it made no sense that cutting back a plant would make it grow. Some books even gave conflicting information on the pruning process. One said to prune only a small bit off the plant, being very careful to not to take too much healthy plant in one clip. Another book told us to cut the canes just about to the dirt. We were so confused, it wasn't funny. What were we to do to ensure we didn't kill the plant?

The moment of truth was soon upon us.

One Saturday morning, my wife faced the rose bushes, pruning sheers in hand. "I hope you know what you're doing," I said, boosting her confidence. "Here goes," she said, as she knelt down and got to work. She sure cut a lot off those plants.

Apple Computer has gone through its own round of pruning recently. Steve Jobs and the rest of Apple's brain trust took a long, hard look at the resurgent company and decided to prune away some major aspects of its operation.

Up to this point, the cuts that Jobs has made are typical for a company trying to tighten up its operations and help its bottom line. I was surprised, however, to hear of Apple's dissolution of Claris. To some Mac users, Claris has always been synonymous with Macintosh. In 1989, the first three Macintosh programs I learned to use were MacPaint, MacDraw, and MacWrite—all Claris products. I was actually surprised to learn that other companies besides Claris produced Macintosh software when I first saw version 3.0 of Aldus PageMaker.

These simple Mac software packages were soon eclipsed by more sophisticated offerings from companies such as Adobe, Microsoft, and Macromedia. However, Claris didn't just up and die. FileMaker has proven to be the company's flagship product. Claris' developers also created a winner with HomePage, the WYSIWYG HTML authoring tool which has stood shoulder to shoulder with such giants as Adobe PageMill. Claris Impact has been a go-to graphing software package for years. I use each of these three products at work, and have found them to be powerful and easy-to-use—a winning combination.

Since Claris' demise, their existing software titles are being split between two entities. The system software development and titles such as Impact will stay with Apple. It is believed that Apple's R&D department can optimize this software to take advantage of new advances in hardware.

The commercially successful FileMaker and HomePage titles have been placed under control of—what should be—a temporary corporation know as FileMaker, Inc. The goal is to entice a major software developer such as Oracle to take out their checkbook and purchase the software. As of February 5th (the date I'm writing this), no deal has been reached.

Is this a good idea? At first, I thought not. When Apple reported monumental losses quarter after quarter, Claris was a consistently good performer. Its profits, usually in the range of \$70 million a quarter, were ammunition against the tendency of DOS and Windows people to highlight Macintosh's faltering market share. FileMaker's widespread acceptance in the Windows community was also a selling point, proving that the folks at Claris were writing good software.

After careful reconsideration, I see where Jobs is going with this. Pruning away even healthy segments of Apple's operation (Claris) will force the company to concentrate on its core products. Operating system development now has a plan which is being executed. OS upgrades are being released on time and are real improvements over previous versions. What a change from the bad old days under previous CEOs, when Apple seemed to be adrift in a sea of products and services without a rudder to steer the way.

Claris was initially established to remove the burden of developing applications software. The eventual plan was to either spin off Claris as a separate entity or attract a buyer to purchase it outright. Maybe it's time for Apple to give up Claris as a security blanket and seek prosperity by continuing to improve upon the most user-friendly computer system available.

I'm often accused of being oblivious. For example, one day when I came home for lunch, I was surprised to see a beautiful rose standing in a bud vase on the kitchen table. I asked my wife, "When did you buy the flower?" "Buy? Oh no, Tom, I cut this from our rose bush. That rose over there," she pointed to a vase on our living room table, "came from outside, too."

"You have got to be kidding me," I said skeptically, but my doubts were quickly dispelled when my wife led me outside. There were our four rose bushes, lush with new foliage and bursting with brightly colored blooms.

The books were right. All of that drastic pruning caused the rose bushes to thrive. I wonder if it works the same way for computer companies?

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