

Garden of Pathos

*A game about dangerous plants, nonverbal storytelling, and the power of quiet
by Chance J. Kallisti*



*For once there was an unknown land
full of strange flowers and subtle perfumes,
a land of which it is joy of all joys to dream,
a land in which all things are perfect,
and poisonous.*

-Velvet Goldmine



You Will Need:

About two hours

5 to 10 players

Markers, colored pencils, or crayons

Plain white paper and duct tape, or white self-adhesive name tags

Scissors

The Setting:

Deep in the forests of Russia lies a place that is not a place, the hut of “the little grandmother,” Baba Yaga, witch of all witches. As much a dark goddess as a force of nature, Baba Yaga (emphasis on the “ga”) might initiate a person into adulthood... or she might eat them. If a human is wise or foolish, lucky or unlucky, they might happen upon her wooden hut, perched atop massive chicken legs in a clearing. “I smell a Russian smell,” the witch will say, if she is home and if they are Russian.

But right now, she is not home, leaving her strange and wondrous house seemingly unguarded from the outside. In truth, the witch’s animals are on guard against intruders when she is away. The hut is an extra-dimensional space, larger on the inside than it appears, so there it has plenty of room for the livestock to have their own barn. A dog and several cats have the run of all the rooms, but even they prefer to avoid the greenhouse. Those plants are vicious, bitter, gigantic, and they don’t like to stay in their pots. That’s a bit much, even for talking dogs and cats.

Today, the door from the greenhouse to the outside has been left unlocked. A clever human could find a way to climb up, unaware that the door doesn’t unlock from the inside...

(More information on Baba Yaga and her house, with citations, is available at <https://bit.ly/2Kpvcb8>.)

Safety Note

This game may stir up feelings of sorrow, loss, or regret. Please play with compassion for both yourself and others. Use of the safety mechanics Lookdown and OK Check-In (<https://bit.ly/2oGSznN>) is strongly recommended. Some groups may also wish to use Open-Door Policy (<https://bit.ly/2DD23VI>).

All players who are able should read this entire document before playing.

Character Creation - 20 to 30 minutes:

Choose one player to be the **moderator**. This person will keep track of time, read aloud the italicized text for each phase of play (beginning with **Sunrise**), and portray the human child starting in the **Midday** phase of play. The **moderator** may now read the text on page 1 marked “**The Setting**” to the other players, if they wish.

Once the **moderator** is chosen, each of the remaining players chooses a poisonous, carnivorous, or otherwise harmful plant to play. A list of samples can be found on page 5, but there’s no need to limit yourself to only the usual suspects. Draw or cut out a picture of your plant, and attach it to your chest.

In the past, each plant in this greenhouse was a human who angered or disappointed Baba Yaga enough to be transformed and imprisoned in her greenhouse. As you progress through the phases of play below, remember one simple rule: **even huge, magical plants can’t speak, write, or use sign language**. They communicate through movement, and by growing objects on their leaves representing what’s important to them.

For their human intruder character, the **moderator** will need to consider the first five questions below. The answer to the sixth question will be obvious when **Midday** comes: you have foolishly, disrespectfully entered the witch’s house uninvited, at your own risk.

Contemplate the character questions below, drawing a single object that symbolizes each answer on individual pieces of paper or nametags. (No letters, numbers, or words.) Attach them to your clothing, to become the leaves of your plant. Each leaf is an important memory from your character’s life, or something that mattered to them.

1. Where do you come from, and how was your life there?
2. Who do you consider family?
3. What did you do for work, or for fun?
4. What defined you when you were a child?
5. Did you go looking for the witch on purpose, or did you find her accidentally?
6. How were you foolish, greedy, dishonest, or disrespectful toward the witch?
7. Why did she transform you instead of eating you? Did you deserve it?

8. Why did you become this plant in particular?
9. How many years have you been here?
10. Do you know a way out of Baba Yaga's house?
11. What do you regret?
12. What do you hope for?

When everyone has at least three or four leaves taped to their clothing, and all feel ready to proceed, continue to the **Sunrise** phase of play.

Sunrise - 10 to 15 minutes:

Moderator: *The sun creeps over the horizon, its warm and nourishing rays filtering through the greenhouse windows. Each plant feels it first on its leaves, then soon in its stem and flowers (if any). A new day has come; time to stretch the old limbs.*

Plant players take this time to move slowly about the room, using their entire bodies to creep, slither, slink, or move however you feel their plants might move.

You may use your mouth to make sound effects such as rustling, creaking, popping, or hissing while you are moving. But no recognizable words may pass your lips.

When all plant players have stretched and explored the space to their satisfaction, signal the beginning of the Midday phase by circling around the **moderator**.

Midday - 30 to 45 minutes:

Moderator: *An intruder has entered the greenhouse. Will your plant help the new human, or trap them here in hope of a reward when Baba Yaga returns? Can the human understand who and what you are (or used to be)? Do they deserve your help?*

The **moderator** now begins playing their human intruder.

As before, the plants may use movement and sound effects to communicate with the human.

The human may speak, but must do so quietly. Otherwise, the animal guardians in the rest of the house might come running.

A plant may remove one (and only one) of its leaves, presenting it to the human to keep for the rest of the game. The human may try to steal a leaf from an unwilling plant, after using the OK Checkin to confirm the player agrees to it.

When the human has collected leaves from each plant possible, the **Dusk** phase begins.

Dusk - 5 to 10 minutes

As the day draws to a close, the human must find a way to escape, or be stuck in Baba Yaga's house, possibly forever. This is urgent, for she is soon to return from her flight through the countryside in her mortar and pestle.

This phase ends with the human explaining how they will use the objects on their leaves to escape the house. The story may be fantastical, but should have some kind of internal consistency (even if it's dream logic). If the players agree it makes sense as a way to escape the house, then the human has escaped. Otherwise, the moderator narrates what happens when Baba Yaga returns home. Likely, it will be one of the following:

- The human is transformed into a plant.
- Baba Yaga decides to eat the human.
- One of the plants eats or crushes the human.
- The human dies, after eating one of the plants.

When the human's story is complete, it's time for the final phase of play, **Evening**.

Evening - 15 to 20 minutes

This phase of play begins like the **Midday** phase: take two or three minutes to move about the room as your plant, using your whole body, and using your voice for sound effects. Then decide where in the room your plant's pot is located. Make your way back to that part of the room, settling into a restful pose for the night, as the sun drops all the way below the horizon. When you are ready to be out of character, sit down.

The **moderator** returns their leaves / memories / art to the players who drew them, reminding everyone that the following debrief is optional. Players who wish to leave may do so. The **moderator** then directs discussion by asking some of the following questions:

Why did you choose the plant you did?

How did your character's history and background influence the way you moved, or what you drew?

Did the human's interpretation of your drawings differ from what you were trying to convey?

If your character could speak, what would they say right now?

What feelings did the game bring up for you? How are you feeling now?

What was one of the most intense parts of the game for you?

Did you have any favorite moments?

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