

Adventures in the Community Garden

The sun cast an orange glow on the horizon as it rose above the hill and pierced its way through the trees. Walking down the freshly cut grass path, early morning dew soaked through my mesh tennis shoes, making them squeak with each step. The August air smelled fresh and sweet, like a melon after just being sliced open. Reaching my destination, I knelt, setting down a plastic bucket containing a pair of gloves, a small shovel and a knife. Standing up once again, I surveyed the ground around me. Where a row of peas once stood, there were now three shriveled vines, snaking across the ground. Several uprooted cucumber plants clung desperately to the broken remains of a toppled trellis. Where carrot seeds had once been planted but never sprouted, weeds now crept their way over the ground. A heap of mushy, yellow leaves vaguely resembling a zucchini plant melted into the corner. I laughed to myself, thinking how pitiful this mangled, overgrown jungle of plants must look to passers-by. It didn't look like much, but this 16 foot by 16 foot plot was our family's community garden.

Sprinkled between the ruins were several thriving tomato plants, some bush beans, peppers and lettuce. I slowly wandered up and down the rows, uprooting weeds, pruning dying branches, and reaching out here and there to pluck the ripest produce. The tension just before a tomato sprung free from the plant resulted in a spray of water landing on my forearm. Hearing a rustle in the distance, I looked up. "Good morning," Dale called out. I waved back, smiling. Dale was our plot-neighbor; a true patriot and Vietnam War veteran. Dale had taken us under his wing in June, and had recently taught us how to revive our tomato plants from an infestation of aphids (small, white bugs that prey upon garden plants). Now he approached with his own bucket, stopping next to the small, faded American flag he resurrected annually in the center of his plot. He prepared to pull some big weeds out of his garden. "How are the tomatoes doing?"

he asked. “They’re much better this week. Look at these!” I exclaimed, proudly holding up two freshly picked cherry tomatoes for him to inspect. He looked them over and nodded his approval before turning to his own work.

Our foray into gardening began two years ago in response to some health issues. When our daughter went through some severe respiratory problems, her doctor warned that preservatives and artificial fillers often exacerbate asthma-like symptoms. Eliminating those foods involved a lot of changes, both habitual and financial, so we decided to try experimenting with growing some of our food to reduce our grocery bills. One tomato plant potted on the patio gradually grew to a few vegetable plants, and finally blossomed into the idea of renting a community garden plot. Gardening may be viewed by some as a private activity, better suited for those seeking solitude. While our community garden provided a way to simplify our hectic lives, reconnect with nature, it also strengthened the connection with our fellow man. The friendships we cultivated with our plot neighbors taught us as much as the act of gardening itself.

When we first reserved our plot in February, I spent months researching ways to ensure our success. I read about companion planting, succession planting, plant types, compost, homemade fertilizers, natural pest prevention, – you name it, I read about it. No amount of planning would prepare me for the rich experiences and family memories we experienced on the unkempt, weed-ridden road to a successful garden. As first-timers to the community gardens, we were looked upon with friendly humor as we plodded through the season. We provided ample entertainment to the other community gardeners who observed our ‘Berenstain Bears’ approach to gardening. As the father bear in the popular children’s book teaches his cubs, they learn more from his comedic fumbles what *not* to do in a variety of situations. In preparation for planting, the park district tills the ground every April. On June first, we marched to the community

garden, towing a wagon full of supplies and enthusiasm. Anyone with gardening experience understands this mistake; planting your garden in June is like showing up for the Superbowl in March. Once you realize the stadium is empty, the grounds crew might look at you with raised eyebrows and muffled snickers. In the midst of a patchwork of well-tended gardens stood our plot. Overgrown with weeds, it looked more like a pasture than a garden. There we stood, jabbering like goats, while our daughter happily danced around us. Four hours later, after renting a tiller and working the ground, our plot neighbor (who we had not yet formally met), walked over and informed my husband that we were “gonna need to re-till that with a finer blade.” My husband sat down on our wagon with a heavy sigh, and wiped the sweat from his brow. Dale disappeared momentarily and returned carrying his own tiller. He went through our entire 16 foot by 16 foot plot with his small machine until the dirt and weeds were chopped up to his satisfaction. Turning the motor off, he looked around and surveyed his work. “That’s better,” he announced. Dale became our “garden guru,” identifying problems, and offering practical suggestions that kept our garden from withering into a wasteland of tangled vines and dried up vegetables. We planted tomatoes, peas, beans, zucchini, lettuce, carrots, cucumbers and peppers. The carrots never sprouted. We didn’t stake the peas, which were left to grow haphazardly along the ground before being trampled by our daughter. After producing one mutant, overgrown zucchini, the briefly robust plant slowly rotted into the soil. The cucumbers did great – until our shoddy, homemade trellis fell over in a storm and ripped some of the plants out of the ground with it. Providing buckets of produce, the peppers, bush beans and tomato plants grew wonderfully. Those plants must have been engineered to withstand abuse!

In spite of its humble beginnings, our garden was a source of great enjoyment and family memories. Every other morning at dawn, I would sneak out of the house quietly, so as not to

wake my husband and daughter. If I was lucky, I could spend a full hour in the garden, relaxing and preparing for the hectic schedule of the day. It was my time to collect my thoughts and ground myself. In the evenings, my daughter and I stopped by to pick produce that had ripened during the day. She would pick the small, bite sized “matoes” (tomatoes), stuffing them in her mouth between mischievous giggles. Sometimes she would rip a green bean off of the bush, chewing on it until it became limp and lifeless before discarding the shredded remains on the ground or into my hand. One evening, she snatched a jalapeno and took a quick bite, before proclaiming with a grimace that it was “TOO SPICY!” and hurling it across the garden. She looked forward to “ga-den time” and I treasured our together time. On Saturdays, we took family walks to the garden, chatting with our plot neighbors who also congregated there on weekends. Time was spent trading stories, sharing successes, and commiserating over failures (we had a *lot* of failures). Over the course of the summer, we were welcomed into the community garden family, and enjoyed the closeness of newfound friendships. Our neighbors included Dale, Barbara (and her grown daughter), a Japanese family, and a college professor. All of these individuals were friendly and quick to lend a helping hand.

Enjoying the adventure, we learned quickly from our neighbors. Working the garden became easier, and being able to identify cues about the differing needs of each plant was very satisfying. When sprayed with a mixture of Epsom salts and water, peppers and tomatoes grew better. Crushed egg shells and coffee grounds could be used as fertilizer and to fend off slugs. Planting marigolds attracted beneficial insects that helped with pollination and prey on pests. By August, our surviving plants were flourishing, brimming with succulent tomatoes, crisp green beans and shiny peppers. Our garden no longer resembled the goat pasture, but stood as a proud testament to our hard work and neighborly love.

As the weather began to chill, and leaves changed colors, the last of fall crops were harvested. One by one, the trellises disappeared. Watering cans and tools and lawn chairs were packed up and carried off to be stored in garages and sheds until spring. “See you in the spring” echoed across the gardens, and the icy whisper of winter silenced the once-cheerful voices of summer. There was a quiet melancholy to the passing of fall. We had experienced a sense of community that was not found in our busy day-to-day lives, and that was dearly missed. Through the support of our neighbors, we were able to become successful gardeners, and make close friends along the way. Our family, in growing a garden, has also cultivated a bond that will last well beyond the frozen months of winter. And spring is just around the corner, calling to us softly, giving us hope, and hinting at new beginnings. This time, we’ll be ready.