What Do You Grow in Your Garden?

Growing up on a small family farm, the beginning of spring meant plowing the garden plots, discing the clods of rich earth, hoeing the rows for planting, and buying seed. On warm evenings when the blue skies held the rains at bay, I remember walking barefoot through the cool dirt and very carefully dropping seeds into a fresh-made row. “Don’t plant them too close together,” Mom would warn. “You’ll run out of seed and they won’t come up.” Then, bending and moving seeds I’d dropped by the handfuls. I remember when I was finally allowed to use the wooden-handled garden hoe to drag dark soil into small mounds to make hills for zucchini and cucumber seeds; the hoe was taller than I was, but I felt ‘grown-up’ being allowed to do such an important job.

Perhaps it was here that I began to see gardening as much more than an old-fashioned tradition: instead, gardening became an extended metaphor for life itself. As we progress through life, we either carve our own paths or follow in those made by others. We cautiously decide where to put down roots, and have to be careful not to spread ourselves too thin in whatever endeavors we pursue. We learn to work hard, budget our resources, and to use those resources wisely. Life, in essence, is a garden, and we the stewards in charge of its well-being.

After several days of anxious watching, the seeds would begin to germinate, their heads reaching up toward the sun and poking away the dirt. Excited to see the pretty green rows of peas, cucumbers, tomatoes, beans, peppers, and potatoes, I walked up and down the balks, noticing the cracks in the earth as the water dried and seedlings unfurled into their recognizable shapes, occasionally leaning down and removing the “dirt caps” still covering the tips of the plants. But, as this miraculous process occurred, other things also began punching their green tops through the soil and into the sun: weeds. Seeking to suck the nourishment away from the young vegetables, in a week these imposters would outgrow our plants and begin filling the balks with clumps of intertwined roots and grassy tops. Hours seemed to drag on as we chopped and pulled at the deep-rooted invaders, often crawling on hands and knees through the cool dirt and sharp stones to yank them from their resting places. Allowing the weeds to fester would have meant losing our entire crop and having nothing to preserve for winter.

Like the weeds, we can all think of negative people and influences in our lives which seek only to feed from us until there’s nothing left before moving on to someone else. Though not always the easiest task to accomplish, the first step to reclaiming our ground is to pluck out the negative people and situations which surround us and prevent us from reaching our full potentials. This could be as simple as holding onto positive thoughts and trying to see the good in everything that happens, or as difficult as severing relationships and avoiding particular people and places. In the most difficult circumstances, as with a garden, when the weeds are too thick and hard to remove, it may be necessary to move a plant to a new location so it can reach its fullest potential. In order to allow ourselves to develop and flourish, we may need to separate ourselves physically (or emotionally) from certain harmful or destructive people, places, or attitudes. It always seems risky to uproot something and plant it in new ground, but with the proper watering and nurturing, it will push its roots into the earth and even begin to bloom. And so it is with us.

As the plants in the garden began to spread, vine, and bloom, I remember carrying two-and-a-half gallon buckets of fertilizer pellets up each balk and spreading it near the plants, careful not to over-fertilize or get the fertilizer too near the roots where it would, essentially, cook the plant. Pouring water on each plant’s roots created tiny rivers of mud that pooled around the plants and ran haphazardly into the balk and under bare feet. Fingers buried in soil, we pulled dirt around the plant stems, over the fertilizer and water. This little bit of food and water would allow the plants to continue growing and begin producing vegetables.

Though we don’t pour fertilizer pellets and water on ourselves to provide nourishment, it is still essential that we take care of ourselves.

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All these things I remember about working in the garden when I was young. I was taught early the importance of hard work: “If we don’t work hard now, we won’t have food to eat in the winter.” I sometimes struggled to understand this premise, since we lived less than forty-five minutes from a grocery and were rarely stranded at home by icy roads for more than a week. Yet, as I grew older, I began to understand the reasoning behind this advice

Bean seeds: in a constant row, just not in clumps. Lettuce: constant row, not in clumps. Cucumbers: two or three seeds per hill, and hills sixteen inches apart. Zucchini: two seeds per hill, hills eighteen inches apart. Corn: three kernels every eight inches (but until I was fourteen I wasn’t allowed to sow the corn because the seeds we used were coated with a poisonous pink coating…)

You only get out of life what you put in it; don’t be afraid to get your hands dirty

Reap what you sow

Have to work for what you get

Fertilizer-the tender loving care, the positive influences in our lives, the people who help us grow into the person we become