

Cultivating Knowledge

My favorite picture is of my grandmother leaning down over a tender tomato plant amidst a field of green growing things with me standing at her side holding her old tried and true garden hoe. She used the same hoe blade for most of my life, lovingly sharpening it each spring of those thirty something years. Yes, it was considerably shorter than the ones you are used to seeing. Thirty years of filing had reshaped it to just the right sharp cornered rectangle to get to those pesky weeds that like to nestle close to your prized vegetable stems. Hers was a cruelly accurate yet magically gentle tool with a handle worn smooth by rough hands and years of tending.

My grandmother grew everything. She also cooked, canned, and preserved everything. Supper always included various vegetables fresh from the garden or from the winter stockpile in the deep freezer. Summer evenings were not complete until the youngest child (usually me) was sent out into the garden to collect the meal's accompaniment of fresh sweet and hot peppers, sweet onions, cucumbers, and tomatoes, all of which would be sliced and beautifully arrayed in a colorful, enticing montage on a white china platter. You know the kind of display that transports your small dinner table into a fine restaurant somewhere. The kind that made you feel sad for those who only had 5-a-day.

Our vegetable garden was bigger than our back yard. It was big enough to hold a small house and still have room to play. Perfectly straight dirt rows mounded up, topped with healthy vibrant plants of corn, squash, peppers, peas, carrots, okra, eggplants, cucumbers, beets, onions, garlic, watermelons, beans, potatoes, you name it. We had our very own produce market ripe for the picking most of the year. There is nothing more delicious than a carrot sweet from the soil or

a tomato still warm from the sun. Whatever we wanted could be found right there among those green rows.

Warm evenings were spent carrying the galvanized bucket of weeds from the turn-row to the compost. Then my grandmother and I would sit on the swing or at the picnic table shelling peas or some other lazy chore while patiently allowing the water hose to soak the furrows of each line before moving on to the next. Many late nights were spent running out every 20 minutes to move the hose with a flashlight. Goodness cannot be rushed.

The garden was not just a thing or a place; it was a state of mind. The words “I’m going to the garden” invoked an irresistible excitement that drew me out the door to see what was going on out there. The breeze was always cooler, the scent sweeter in the garden. Silence was savored in the rhythmic chop of a hoe, or the yielding tug of a weed between your fingers. Slowly moving through a forest of okra and corn stalks was the most delightful game. Feeling the warm earth clinging to the new red potatoes was the perfect appetizer for the creamy sauce dinner they promised later. Don’t get me wrong, my grandmother had more than an ample supply of roses, hydrangeas, and other old-tyme beauties surrounding the house. But her truest joy was in the enchanted vegetable garden.

Now I am an adult and she has gone on to her Master’s garden. I look at our picture and thank her for silently teaching me how to break down and rebuild furrows, how to carefully plant a row of seeds, how to thin out crops, how to tie and hang up onions to dry, how to sharpen tools, and how to enjoy life while working up a sweat. I did not learn everything but I do have the confidence to keep learning. I have her name, her patience, and her tenacity. I have the same dark earth running through my veins. We are gardeners and flowers will never be enough.