

My Summer Garden

When I was a teenager growing up in the country, I often grew a garden. It was just as much a learning experience for me as high school, and many times it was more enjoyable.

I liked working in my garden. The sun and clouds and blue skies just seemed to be so much better than the little, closed-in world of a school building. I couldn't wait for my boring classes to end so I could go home and get down to the real business at hand: gardening.

The Gurney, Burpee and Henry Field seed catalogs came during the snows of January, and I'd go through them intensely, reading each and every description of each and every vegetable, and examining each and every photograph with a critical eye. It was on those cold January nights after a day of classes that I planned my summer garden.

By February, I'd placed my orders, and by March, watching the gray clouds of change rushing overhead, I was ready and waiting.

Although a Northern boy, I've always had an interest in the ways of the South. This was reflected in my garden. Sure, I grew the usual: sweet corn, tomatoes (Big Boy or Beefsteak), lettuce and string beans, to name a few. But I also grew hominy corn and sweet potatoes and peanuts, items not usually seen in Northern gardens.

On one sun-soaked Saturday morning in spring, I drove my mother's car to town to a seed store, and there I examined bundles of tender young sweet potato vines, rolled neatly in cones made of newspaper, held together by a rubber band. I had some money saved up and made a purchase of two dozen plants.

The salesman told me sweet potato vines need a lot of moisture to do well, so early on I resolved to water my growing plants every day throughout the spring and summer, and into the back-to-school time of September and October. Consequently, after cold weather had wilted my plants, I dug up a huge crop of sweet potatoes, far beyond my expectations. I kept them stockpiled in the garage for about a week, then decided I could never use so many during the winter months. I sold them to a local grocery store for a nice profit. They in turn sold every last one of them and said they could have sold more if I'd had more.

My other crops were not cash crops, but they were no less interesting. I grew white hominy corn. Hominy grows on huge cornstalks and people would ask me what in the world am

I growing out there, what kind of corn is that anyway. But taking the tough hulls off hominy requires a lye soak and several fresh water rinses, and it was more work than I had planned on. So after one or two seasons, I abandoned the hominy line.

Peanuts are another Southern crop that can be grown in Northern climates. Actually, the branches of the peanut plant send shoots down into the ground, and this then becomes the peanut. So it is necessary to keep the ground loose around the plant to allow this to happen. Harvesting is done by pulling the entire plant and allowing them to dry in the sunshine. I placed plywood boards across sawhorses and spread the plants out to dry. Then I had to gather the peanuts and roast them in the oven, and of course they're unsalted and this makes a difference. Still, they had an excellent flavor, making commercial peanuts seem bland by comparison.

In late summer I would sow turnips. This would be my second crop, my winter crop. And I would store them as our more self-reliant pioneers did in the days of old. Before the ground froze, I dug a hole about eighteen inches deep and as wide as needed. I put down my turnip crop, covered the hole with old boards, and then covered that with a layer of hay or straw. The boards kept most of the water out, and the straw allowed for air circulation yet kept the temperature fairly constant.

My turnips kept very nicely through the winter months. I had dug below the frost line, the ground was cold enough to keep the turnips from growing, and there was adequate moisture to keep them from drying out. A root cellar need not be complicated.

I always grew Mammoth sunflowers that soared into the sky and stared at the sun. I always liked them because they grew so big, they were a cheery yellow color, and they were easy to grow. The seeds were edible but I used them merely as bird food in the wintertime. I couldn't see why anyone would want to go to the trouble of breaking open all those little hulls just to eat a tiny little seed. Let the birds have them.

As I look back now, I recall how it was good to watch my garden growing in the warm summer sun. And it was good to watch my garden gleaming on moonlit summer nights. The whole universe was both overhead and at my feet, and I was lost in the magic and wonder of Creation.

There is an education that cannot be had in school. It is an education of being in harmony with the laws of Nature. You can't get a diploma from this school, but learning the lessons it teaches can bring you true success in life.

I'm older now and my summer garden is no more, except in my memory. Nowadays, the garden that I grow is the words that I write. Over the years I've seen many people who are bitter, angry, destructive in their lives. But I hope you will take some time to grow a garden in your life, whatever that garden may be to you. And in your own small way, become a force of creation, not destruction.

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