

Mom's Garden

“Kuh-plink”, “thwuck”, “ping!” These sounds were as much a part of my growing-up Illinois summer world as the sound of crickets chirping or the “pop, pop” of an old John Deere tractor in the distance. You see, my mom canned everything she could scrounge together for the coming winter and her counters were always full of jars, still hot from the canners. Food was placed in glass jars with lids tightly screwed in place, then processed in boiling water for the prescribed amount of time in a huge kettle on top of the stove. The kettle held 7 quart jars or 14 pint jars of produce at one time. When the time was up, the jars were carefully lifted out of the boiling water and placed on the counter. As the jars cooled, the thin gold-colored wafer lids sealed themselves to the rims of the jars, creating a vacuum and the resulting “Ping” when the lid drew down tightly. Often Mom worked all day at food preservation and the last cannerful was unloaded just before she went to bed. The “Pings” could be heard for a good bit of the night and it was a comforting sound. You just knew those jars of goodies would taste super when the snow was flying and the kitchen was all warm and toasty, heated by the coal-burning cook stove.

(OK, that cook stove also burned corn cobs. Late in the fall, the dry ears of corn were brought in from the fields and stored in corn cribs. Then the ears of corn were shelled and the dusty red cobs were saved for cook stove fuel and placed under roof to keep the cobs dry. My parents had a large building south of the house dedicated to just storing cobs. It was such fun to sneak into that shed and slide down the pile with my dog. We really raised the dust until Mom caught us and made us get out of there. It was my job to keep the cob box filled behind the big white stove so each day I carried a few bushels of cobs to the house. The cob box had a hinged lid and a cushion on its top. It was the BEST place to curl up for a nap or read my books, all warm and out of the day's activities.)

Mom always had a huge garden. Usually it was along a field lane so she could have easy access to the crops. A healthy layer of organic fertilizer--- from the cow barn--- was spread on the ground just before the dirt was plowed. Dad marked the rows with his corn planter so that the garden could be cultivated with his corn plow. Back then nobody had even heard of a roto-tiller. Any weeds that the corn plow missed were cleared out using the Santa Clause method.....Hoe, hoe, hoe.

Very early in the spring Mom started her “hotbed” along the south side of the chicken house. This was pretty much a long shallow box frame with a couple of old storm windows balanced over the edges so the sun would warm the plants but the frost could not damage them. This spot was the source of our early lettuce and radishes. It was also the origin for many of Mom's plants which she transplanted out to the field garden after the danger of frost was past. Being beside the chicken house, there was plenty of available fertilizer and those “hotbed” plants grew like gang-busters.

A day or two before Memorial Day (Memorial Day was usually reserved for the grade school picnic!) Mom planted her garden. There were rows and rows of vegetables. My parents grew

all their own potatoes so that crop took up a good bit of space. And certainly you had to have four or five varieties of beans, plenty of beets, squash, cucumbers, carrots, peas, more lettuce and radishes, muskmelons (You call them cantaloupes but they were muskmelons to us.), watermelons, sweet corn, and the list goes on. Each year Mom tried some new vegetable. Some were successes, some were abysmal flops. She tried celery, even stacking boards alongside the stalks to “blanch” them, but that product was no match for the celery at the A&P store. Her peanuts were not anything to brag about either. Spaghetti squash sounded a whole lot better than it tasted. Salsify was good though and kohlrabi was a winner. The ground just was not right for sweet potatoes and Dad was not keen on the spinach. My Grandma Pieper liked the eggplants but they were not a repeat performer.

Mom always bought cabbage, cauliflower, and tomato plants from DeMeesters on the south edge of Freeport or from Moellenbrandts downtown. These plants did not come in today’s cute little cups or square containers. You brought them home, wrapped in a couple of wet newspapers, and you better get those babies set out in the garden yet that evening or risk losing them. Since the garden was too far from the buildings to run a water hose, you had to haul buckets and buckets of fresh water for the transplanting process. It felt so good the next day to tour the garden and see that the plants had survived their move.

One of the first crops to mature was the peas. It was such a pain to pod them so Mom tried something she read about. She fed them thru the wringer of the old Maytag washer and the pods popped alright--- peas flew all over the kitchen, even though Mom held a dishpan where those peas were supposed to come out of the wringer. She had the wringer set loose enough so the peas were not crushed and it worked out “fair”. The big problem was getting those wringer rollers white again. Bleach and hot water were no match for juicy pea pods and we slept between pale green sheets for part of one summer. We went back to the old method of podding the peas by hand after that.

Back then there were very few wild deer to molest Mom’s garden but the chickens did love to escape their pens and headed straight for the garden. If you heard one cackle during the day, it was “all hands on deck” to chase down that dirty bird.



In the garden was usually a huge strawberry bed. Canned berries were not a satisfactory product so we ate our fill, made batches and batches of jam and gave away or sold the rest of those jewels before my folks bought their freezer. The relatives from Chicago visited one year during strawberry season and were excited at the prospect of picking their own farm-fresh berries. Everybody headed out to the garden and they passed right by the strawberry bed. They were shocked that the berries did not grow on trees and at how much work it was to stoop over and pick them. They declared that they would never again complain about paying twenty five cents a quart for strawberries in the supermarket!

The outside row was generally filled with flowers. Mom grew hundreds of gladiolus and I detested sorting the bulbs out of the dirt each fall so we could store them in the basement for the next year. For some reason, one summer, I took bouquets of gladiolus to the lady who owned the local tavern.



One evening she had a pretty little white plush dog waiting for me and I felt like the richest kid in the county---but I still didn't like digging up those bulbs each fall.

As the growing season progressed, the buckets of vegetables and fruits became more numerous in our kitchen. Any cucumber that got too big was turned into relish and the rest became sweet green pickles. The rinds of watermelon found their way into pickle brine too. By the end of the season, much of what was left of the summer vegetables became soup mix and joined the rows of

jars in the basement. Most of the tomatoes were packed into quart jars for our winter pleasure and she even tried to make catsup. Mom bought and canned bushels of peaches but she also had a white peach tree which yielded fruit some years and gave her dessert options more variety. Of course, pears, blackberries, cherries, wild choke cherries, and concord grapes were added to the stash. Ground cherries and huckleberries were an unusual fare and were turned into pies for the most part.

One year the potato crop failed but there was a bumper crop of butternut squash. My folks loaded them all up in a big wagon, left them “harden off” in the garage for a couple of weeks, then stored them in the basement. We ate a good many squash that winter and Mom got pretty creative with those things.

About the time I was in fifth grade, my parents bought their first freezer. On the day it was delivered, I remember Mom coming out of the bedroom with a long white cloth sack of coins. There was enough money in that sack to completely pay for the new appliance. Mom went a little nuts with that freezer. It opened a whole new avenue of food preservation for her and we were the willing recipients of her expertise.

In later years the gardens got smaller but were every bit as lush and weed-free as before. Her last garden was north of the brooder house after chickens were no longer residents of Edwardsville Road, German Valley, Illinois. Dad’s tractor and corn plow were replaced by a modern roto tiller and a garden hose was available from the water hydrant.

Then, one year, there no longer was a garden. Soon after that Mom was gone and Dad followed her 13 months later. When I drive by my birthplace now, all of the fields are planted to row crops right up to the lawn and the chicken yard is part of that lawn too. Through the eyes of my heart Mom’s gardens, kept with sweat, hard work, and love, will always be right there. Shhhhh! Did you just hear a “Ping!!!”?