Master Gardeners Are Made In Backyards

Edward (Cal) Thompson, Frederick County Master Gardener

Sitting in the classroom of the 2008 Master Gardener's program recently, I found myself wondering how I ended up listening to talks about insects, annuals, and soil types.

My early memories revolve around the garden my father grew in the backyard of our home on Edgewood Church Road.

Every Easter, Dad hauled his orange rototiller out of the garage, pulling on the “stupid" starter rope and telling me to “Just back up! Can’t you see I’m working?” (It might have surprised him to learn that he didn't need to till the ground so much to have a fine garden, but they didn't have Master Gardener courses then).

The tiller chewed into the dirt, flinging clods of earth and reminding me of a metallic badger. Once my father settled into his rhythm, he waved me over. Walking in front of him and putting my hands on the vibrating handles, I pretended puberty was over. Within minutes, the tiller was buried up to its chassis, but I inhaled the power of a manly exhaust for five minute segments that lasted in my mind for years.

In May each year, Dad came to me with his hands behind his back, shaking a packet of seeds. “Let’s plant radishes.” Radishes are immediate rewards for boys, their short life cycle starting almost as soon as dirt (er, I mean "soil") touches them. My biggest problem was pulling up the plants after only a few days. Disappointed, I’d stuff the nubby tubers back into the ground out of sympathy. Radishes taught me much about patience.

In spring, sunflowers were planted, just "for the kids." These wonders with axe-handle stalks kept their faces turned down just so I could look up into them (or so I believed), inspecting bumble bees that swarmed them. When five or six of the flowers opened their petals simultaneously and swayed to the track of the sun, I thought the earth was moving beneath my feet in response to a celestial rhythm. Metaphysical experiences are not just for adults.

As summer mellowed, the garden became a veritable playground. Rows of corn made a castle, impregnable to household duties. The list of what a boy can do with the itchy leaves is quite long. Watermelon and cantaloupe vines were treasure hunts – a perfect melon is a rara avis experience for any serious gardener. Potatoes were archeological rewards, lumpy fossils we

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could eat. Tomatoes were baseballs (of course), winging their way to any available target. (It is an advantage to be the oldest boy in these situations). The black-bottomed, slightly rotten ones were best. No sane child would eat squash, but we like to grow it, just the same.

Late August turned the garden to dust, and September shriveled the leaves to brown. Anticipation of school helped me with this sad time that I didn't understand for many years. There was a sense of loss every time my father put the hoe, the tomato stakes, and a part of himself back in the shed.

The Master Gardener class is helping me to understand just what my father was doing. I think he would have enjoyed sitting with men and women just like him – the kind who will sacrifice a bit of landscape for a few rows of radishes.

I'm ready to plant tomatoes again -- Brandywines make the biggest splat.

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, (301) 600-1596, or visit http://www.frederick.umd.edu/. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.