

Harvest Much More than Food at a Community Garden

I never met my husband's Grandpa Gene, but by all accounts, he was the best gardener in Birmingham, Michigan, in the 1950s and 60s. Using all organic methods in his tiny suburban backyard, he grew apples, plums, two kinds of cherries, berries, innumerable vegetables, and so many roses that the fragrance beckoned strangers to wander into his yard. As a boy, my husband-to-be would help in the garden, and Gene would teach him about composting and terracing and using the right tools. But grandma would soon call them in to a lunch of homemade gazpacho and blackberry pie. And their grandson would get what he had really come for.

With spring well underway, I've been thinking a lot about this story. Gardening served many purposes for my husband's family—a way to bond with another generation and with neighbors, a means to teach and learn skills, and, of course, a source of delicious, healthy food. Despite our urban lifestyles and the polluting mess we've made of most farming, gardens are rooted in our culture as idyllic settings of health and abundance. From the Garden of Eden to English gardens to victory gardens, we celebrate gardening as a way to cultivate happiness and tend our souls.

Even if you don't have a yard or decent growing soil, you can experience the bonding, growth, and plenty of gardening by participating in a community garden. Ann Arbor's Project Grow, a primarily volunteer-run nonprofit, manages seven garden locations throughout the city. Property owned by the City, County, public schools, and local churches is loaned to Project Grow, which stakes out 20-80 plots per site and ensures the availability of water and tools. Gardeners are assigned plots for a modest fee (\$35-\$60 depending on the plot size and location; fees can be reduced or waived for low-income participants). Most plots are all organic, using composting, mulching, crop rotation, ladybugs (which eat pests), and other natural strategies to fertilize the soil and control weeds, disease, and insects.

Not only is Project Grow an important source of land for apartment dwellers and others, but it's a social resource too, bring-

ing people together to share ideas, seeds, tools, and food. Project Grow has put together all the elements for successful gardening and community building: A single plot is often gardened by several families, a girl scout troop, or a group of developmentally disabled adults. All gardeners are expected to volunteer a few hours of their time during the season to help with staking garden plots, maintaining sites, or cleaning up in the fall. A bulletin board at every site displays announcements and allows gardeners to communicate with each other. And surplus produce is collected regularly for Food Gatherers, a nonprofit food rescue program for agencies that serve hungry people.

Project Grow also serves educational purposes. They offer regular workshops on organic gardening throughout the spring and summer, and a Compost Education Center, outside the Leslie Science Center, demonstrates successful composting practices.

For the past seven years, Chris Zemke has reaped the rewards of a Project Grow garden, cultivating his own 25' x 30' plot at either Peace Neighborhood Center, Zion Lutheran Church, or County Farm Park. He regularly avails himself of the donated tools, usually arriving by bike at his plot with only a foldable shovel. He has also enjoyed meeting other gardeners. "We all want to take care of the planet," he says. "I'm reminded that I'm just another chump on the earth that's squeezing some dirt." Fellow gardeners have been generous with leftover seeds and flowers and with tips on handling problems like tomato bugs. And Chris has gotten better acquainted with his own neighborhood as he's run into his neighbors at the gardens.

But, of course, another reward is the food. "I'm going for that Italian peasant diet in my garden," Chris tells me. Each season, he harvests over 40 basil plants and ten different kinds of tomatoes as well as zucchini, onions, potatoes, swiss chard, broccoli, oregano, and rosemary. From this simple list, he indulges his friends and neighbors with delicious pesto, marinara sauces, potato leek soup, zucchini bread, and vegetarian chili. He also freezes these preparations and cans the tomatoes, so the rewards last for months.

"It's a testament to frugality," Chris says, claiming that he can get by on very little grocery shopping during the harvest months. "If you make the investment up front, you can stay in good, fresh foods for a long time afterward." And what he grows is "absolutely better than I could buy. Better tartness and

flavor. When other people taste the vegetables, they say, 'Wow, where did you get these?'" This year, Chris hopes to try growing more herbs and hot peppers to expand his culinary options.

The benefits don't stop at the food, however. Like the gardens of our myths and metaphors, Chris's garden is a source of serenity. "When I'm down or really need something good in my life, the garden ends up being that thing." He uses words like "nurturing" and "productive," probably not even realizing how much the act of gardening has crept into his vocabulary. He even tells me that a new relationship with his mother has sprouted, now that they share a mutual interest in gardening.

Chris's experiences are surely more the rule than the exception at Project Grow. Plots for the 1999 season are already being assigned, but last I heard there were still some available (call director Sarah Hashimoto at 996-3169). Too bad Grandpa Gene isn't around to share his secrets, but I bet you'll find plenty of knowledgeable help at the community gardens. And who knows, you might even cultivate new skills, grow your sense of pride, become better rooted in the community, sow the seeds of a new friendship, dig deep into your own soul. . .