

Shawna Arnold

Farmer's Daughter

I come from a long line of farmers. My dad is 78 years old and farms the same land today that his father farmed. We always had a garden when I was growing up. Being able to raise my own food has been important to me most of my life. The older I get, the more important it becomes, and the more I realize that growing your own food may be becoming a lost art.

It used to be that everybody raised a garden. That is what you did if you wanted to survive. As the country has become more populated, people have discovered that they can perform other types of work and get paid money for it. They have turned away from working the land. Of course there are too many other needs in our society for everyone to just grow gardens, but perhaps we have moved too far away from something that is very basic.

As a child, I loved to play in the dirt. I did it for fun then, but as I have gotten older, I have realized that I still love to play in the dirt. I love the way it feels and the way it smells. Even though it gets under my fingernails, there is just something about running my hands through healthy, rich soil that gives me solidarity. It puts me back in touch with the earth and makes me feel close to God.

Have you ever stuck a seed in the ground, cared for it, and felt the excitement when it first peeked through the soil? In 70 plus years of gardening, my father still is in awe when he sees the miracle of growth as those sprigs of green first come through. He usually doesn't wait until they can be seen. He very carefully brushes the dirt out of the way to see the

sprouting process and how far the seeds have come. He keeps track, almost on a daily basis, of where the growth process is, and every year he is amazed by the miracle.

One of the neatest parts of gardening is the knowledge gained through the experiences. I have thought many times through the years about the wealth of knowledge that my dad has about gardening. He could fill volumes. It is interesting to think of how that knowledge has been acquired. Much of it was passed down from his father. Much more of it was gained by personal experiences, by trial and error. That is often the best way to learn. I'm glad that some of that knowledge has been passed to me. I have learned that when the corn leaves start turning yellow, you are watering it too much, and that corn only needs watering once a week. Other foods, like cucumbers, require a lot more water to do well. If you water potatoes too much, they will rot. My dad has shared some of this information with me, but some of it I learned after making a mistake or two. There is always more to learn, no matter how old you are or how long you have been gardening.

I have planted literally thousands of seeds through the years and watched thousands of plants come up. I have eaten an unbelievable amount of home grown food, yet I can't begin to describe the feeling I get every year when I see that first sprig of asparagus push through the ground. There is a feeling of accomplishment that comes from watching something grow from a tiny seed, and there is nothing like the flavor of a home-grown tomato. It is amazing to me that people who haven't raised their own food believe that tomatoes are supposed to taste like cardboard. I always dread when the first frost comes, because I know that I have to eat tasteless vegetables for a few months.

A big advantage to raising your own food is that you know exactly what it has been exposed to. With the produce you buy from the store, you have no idea what has been put on

or in that salad. There are pesticides to kill bugs and fertilizers to make things grow faster and bigger and greener. Are you sure you know what effects those chemicals may have down the road? Of course they have to be used commercially, because that gardening is done on such a large scale, but if you raise your own garden, you have much more control over what you put on it. We have a neighbor who has horses, and about once a year we help him out by cleaning out his corral and using it as fertilizer on our garden. One man's poop is another man's treasure.

Up until a few years ago, my dad used a mule-drawn plow, planter, and cultivator to work his garden. It was awesome to watch him walking up and down the rows behind the mule and the animal drawn equipment from a different era. He would probably still be using that method, but all of his mules finally got old and died. He now just uses his tractor. It is also an antique, and he cherishes it like it is one of his kids. Several years ago I expressed a desire to learn how to use the tractor, so he taught me. It was so cool. I would sit on that old tractor for hours, going back and forth in the garden, disking the ground, getting it ready to plant. It helped me gain a greater appreciation for the years of hard work my dad had put into raising the food I ate.

One of the big excuses that keep people from raising a garden is the amount of work involved. It is a lot of hard work, and it is very time consuming. That can be remedied partly by keeping things on a small enough scale. I have raised gardens that cover an acre of ground. I have also raised gardens that consist of a few plants that are very low maintenance. I prefer the small gardens much better, especially as I get older. I have also learned in my 40 plus years, that it is okay to work really hard. It is good for you, both mentally and physically, and people need to do it more. Working in a garden helps you develop a good

work ethic, and that is an important part of life. I don't know anyone who has a better work ethic than my dad, and most of that ethic was established in his garden.

I personally feel that everyone should know how to raise a garden of some kind, even if it is a tomato plant in a pot in the house. The knowledge can only benefit you. The personal satisfaction you gain from planting a tiny seed, nurturing it, and then being able to “reap what you have sown,” is a feeling you just can't explain, and you are missing out if you haven't experienced it. Of all the important reasons to plant a garden, probably the most important is this – what if you walked into Wal-Mart some day, and there was no food on the shelves? What if a disaster in some part of the United States caused crop failures and there was no lettuce or tomatoes or potatoes? What if there was a trucking strike and the food just wasn't being delivered to the stores? We live in a country where we have always had plenty to eat, and we assume that will always be the case, and maybe it will; but maybe it won't. I believe that the more prepared I am, the better I will weather disasters if and when they come. If they never come, well at least I have a lot of knowledge and some really great tasting food.