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Published in *The Christian Science Monitor*

726 words

## Gardening the Fishpond in Our Back Yard

There was no place for a garden in our small back yard without digging up the lawn. I didn't want to dig up the lawn. There was an unused, dry fishpond, rather crude, that an earlier renter had made by digging out a spot and hand sculpting cement into place to form an oval pond. In the way of unsupported concrete, it had cracked widely in several places, making it incapable of holding water but suggesting to my questing mind a small, well-drained garden.

I imported soil and sheep manure from the ranch where I worked, mixed them thoroughly in my concrete-lined garden, watered, waited long enough to let the fertilizer mellow, and planted seeds. Since I was shoveling, hauling, and working ground anyway, Laura asked me to prepare a flower bed in the front yard, and I also worked in fertilizer there. She wanted flowers through the spring and summer and to celebrate the birth of our first child in the fall. I planted that flower garden near the front steps as I waited for seeds in the vegetable garden in the back yard to sprout.

The Northern Sacramento Valley's hot, long summers are ideal for most crops. Before long, we harvested and ate a variety of vegetables from our garden.

I began to cook soups that took advantage of our crops and provided full meals for us. I cooked enough brown rice for Laura and me and, on occasion, guests. I boiled whatever vegetables were ready to harvest from our garden, edible pod peas, green beans, small carrots, or later, cut-up larger carrots, beets, kohlrabi, kale, collard greens, mustard greens (with careful attention to whether they were starting to get strong-flavored and therefore must be used sparingly), green onions, chives, yellow crookneck squash, zucchini squash, squash blossoms, and tomatoes.

Timing was essential. I put the longest-cooking vegetables in my boiling water first, and I put the quickest-cooking in last. While the vegetables cooked, I added soy sauce, garlic, and, sometimes, sparingly, nutritional yeast.

I didn't allow any of the vegetables to cook very long. I left the vegetables just short of fully-cooked, so that they were still crisp and held their integrity as individual vegetables. Tomatoes are cooked as soon as they're hot, and they would not hold their individual integrity but spread their juices and seeds throughout the soup, which was as perfect as if I'd carefully planned it that way. I didn't have room in our garden to grow corn, but generous friends had more corn than they could eat coming from their gardens, and I frequently sliced the kernels from the cobs with a sharp knife and added corn near the end of the cooking.

I cooked cheese into the soup or put a generous layer of grated cheese on each bowl of soup. White, sharp cheddar cheese was my favorite, but any cheese we had available would do, and changing cheese brought variety to the soup, which varied further according to what vegetables I harvested minutes before I added them to the soups. Our soup was never the same twice.

Flowers began to blossom in brilliant profusion in Laura's flower garden in front of the house. I hammered together a tall table of plywood and 2 x 2s, and many late afternoons or early evenings, we ate in the back yard, standing by the tall table, feasting from bowls of hot soup, feasting our eyes and our noses on brightly-colored flowers in the center of the table, freshly picked from Laura's flower garden.

We gave thanks before, during, and after our meals for the force that grew our vegetables and flowers and provided so many good and memorable meals from our small, concrete-lined, fishpond garden. Often that summer, we sat in the back yard after dinner as it got dark.

Sounds of the small town around us drifted past trees and shrubs to where we sat. I told Laura that if we sat very still and listened carefully, we could hear the vegetables in our fishpond garden growing for our next day's harvest, and we sat very still and listened. Our first child, within weeks of being born, moved and adjusted her position. Laura said, "The baby's listening, too." We all stayed quiet together. We were sure we heard the small sounds of life, growing, living, all around us, with us.