

Between Storms, a Garden

My chain saw roared and threw chips and sawdust that bounced from my leg and piled on the ground beside my foot. I cut low into the dead Douglas fir tree and dropped it crashing to the ground. I stuck the sticker on the end of the logging tape hanging from my belt loop into the sawed-off end of the tree, walked close beside the downed tree and cut the limbs off. I checked the tape reeling off behind me and cut the tree through at twelve feet, three feet to bury in the ground and nine feet to stand up and support fence.

I looked up the slope to where I had cut several posts. Juniper looped her rope around the end of a post and pulled the post down toward the road. She was working really hard and not making much progress. Dragging posts might be too heavy work for a small, teenaged girl.

I shut the saw off, left it sitting on the ground, picked up the axe, and walked up the hill. I said, "If you knock off stubs of limbs, they drag easier." I rolled the post and knocked off stubs. Then I pulled on the rope and said, "That is a heavy post. I think it's going to take both of us to get it to the pickup."

We pulled posts down to the road and loaded them into our pickup.

Down in the meadow, two miles south of where we cut posts, a hundred yards north of the house, Laura, my wife, and our daughters, Juniper, and Amanda, 13 and 11, and I had removed turf, loosened the soil, mixed in manure, and planted seeds. I poked holes in the bottoms of large cans. We carried water from Lone Pine Creek, flowing by within fifty feet of the garden, and we sprinkled the planted areas. Later, I would find an easier way to get water to the garden than carrying it in buckets, but carrying it worked to begin.

Peas, lettuce, spinach, kohlrabi, garlic, cabbage, and carrots sprouted. The race was on. Deer and elk graze the mountain, and we needed to get the fence up before they discovered the succulent new plants.

Juniper and I drove down the ranch and unloaded the posts by the garden. Juniper said, "I'd like to do something besides work hard all day. Can I go fishing?"

Youth is for learning and for helping on projects like gardens. It's also for having fun and pursuing adventures. I said, "Sure. You've helped a lot.

Do what you want to do.” She ran to the house and got her gear, then came back to the garden, dug worms, and trotted up the creek. I dug postholes.

We hoped to get a garden going on the Girl Scout ranch we took care of in the east slope of northern Colorado’s Rocky Mountains before our short growing season at 7,700 feet was too far gone.

I dug deep, peeled a post, stood it in the hole, and started digging the next hole.

The sun dropped toward the peaks west of us. When I got to the house, Laura said, “Juniper should have been back by now. If she’s gone much longer, it’ll be dark.”

“I’ll go look for her. Do you want to go along, Amanda?”

“Sure.”

We walked down the dirt road and across the meadow. We left the open meadow behind us on the west boundary of the ranch. Huge granite boulders rose three sides of us. The stream flowed noisily over, around, and under boulders, from baseball size to house size. Both sides of the stream, granite boulders become granite ridges. Loggers couldn’t get into the rough area along the stream, down between steep granite ridges, and the fir trees are hundreds of years old. This is a beautiful, ancient place, hidden away by the mountain.

The sun set.

We met Juniper coming downstream with three trout. I said, “Your mother was getting worried.”

“I kept trying to get one more trout so we could each have a fish.”

I said, “ We can divide three fish four ways and have a feast.”

I worked in the garden every day when I finished the work required for the scouts. Juniper helped dig several post holes between hiking, fishing, reading, and riding her bike up the ranch.

As principal teacher of our home school and as mother and wife, Laura had a lot to do, so she didn’t get to the garden often. The garden was still part of what our family was doing, part of our education, which always has as its subject, “What is the universe about? What are we, as humans, as individuals, doing here?”

By the time we moved to Magic Sky ranch, Juniper and Amanda did most of their own guidance for their education, followed their own interests, and read and explored the world. Amanda read about mythology and religions from around the world. For a while, Juniper explored the history of nations and the history of warfare, then got us all to participate

in acting out Shakespeare's play about Julius Caesar.

Laura and I helped our daughters get whatever materials they needed. We organized our time so the family could read together a lot. We all exchanged love and encouragement and participated in the eager quest for new knowledge, new adventures, new experiences. We gardened as much of the universe as we could and harvested the crops it grew for us.

I dug a posthole. Amanda planted carrot and lettuce seeds and garlic. She planted the garlic in the shape of a peace sign. I leaned on my shovel and looked around. Rugged rock formations rose both sides of our small valley and thrust green trees into the sky. West, the valley grew aspen trees but kept them low enough that we could see the mountains rising toward peaks, clouds gathering grey above mountain forests, and lightning dancing down toward granite and green forests.

Dark clouds consumed the blue sky above us. Lightning and thunder flashed and rumbled down the mountain toward us. I said, "I don't think we should be out here as people-tall lightning rods." Amanda picked up the seed can, and we ran for the house and left the work for another day. Before we got to the house, hard rain blew down the wind and soaked us, soaked the earth. We ran into the house, slammed the door shut behind us and went after dry clothes.

Sun rose the next morning, and Amanda and I worked in the garden for a while. Wet soil made hard digging. Dirt stuck to my shovel, and I had to scrape it off. Amanda tamped dirt around the posts with the heavy digging bar. Lightning and thunder approached again, and we ran for the house.

One sunny spring morning, bluebirds courted and chased each other from tree to tree. A flicker hammered the metal extension above the chimney on the house, and the sound filled the small valley. Deer browsed the meadow across Lone Pine Creek from the garden, up by the old barn.

I set the last post, strung, tightened, and stapled stock fencing, built the gate, and fastened it shut.

Lightning and thunder rolled toward us from the mountain peaks west of us. We started for the house, but from a hundred feet away from the garden, we stopped and looked back.

I asked Amanda, "Can a round garden fence, fifty-two feet in diameter, nine feet tall, with twenty-one wooden posts be beautiful?"

She said, "It's beautiful. Only deer with wings could get over that fence." Lightning struck up the creek a half mile. Thunder roared and shook the ground and reminded us how tiny we were on the vast mountain.

We ran for home.

Rain and sunshine and the force that drives plants to grow toward the sky continued their work. Though we had fenced elk and deer out of the garden, we still had to deal with mice, voles, ground squirrels, gophers, rabbits, and summer frosts, but we knew that when we started. It is the way of mountain gardens.

Midsummer, we ate lettuce, peas, and the first tiny carrots. Amanda asked, "Well, was it worth all the work?" Everyone remembered working together and thought of the work that still went on. I thought, nobody ever said living in the mountains and making a living there was easy.

We weren't interested in the easy life but chose the more difficult way. From difficult life come adventures, continuous contact with the mystery of the life force that is still nearly wild in the mountains, and rich memories. We all agreed, "Yes. Oh yes. It is worth it." We chewed fresh, organically grown vegetables, sweet with all our work and all our experiences.