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Gardening Where Few Dare

I find several sayings about gardeners amusing, even though I don't agree with them. "There's no fool like an old gardener." "Gardeners rush in where angels fear to tread." "A gardener and his common sense are soon parted."

When we moved into high country in northeastern Oregon, people told us it would be no use planting a garden, because nothing will grow. I didn't argue with them. But I didn't plan what I was going to do according to what they said, either.

I worked manure and hay into the soil, added dolomite and watered and worked the soil again. I planted hardy vegetables. I also planted four-dozen raspberry plants and thirty-two fruit trees, all of them varieties advertised as very hardy, including cherries, plums, apricots, and apples.

Half the fruit trees and three fourths of the raspberry plants died the first winter. After the second winter, one fruit tree, a Whitney crab apple, and two raspberry plants still grew.

The raspberry plants died the next winter, and only the trunk and two branches of the crab apple survived. The next winter, which dropped to fifty-six below zero, killed the rest of the tree.

Strawberry plants did well, but, with frost every month of the year, many of the blossoms frosted and wouldn't set fruit. Sometimes the timing was just right, and we got some berries, so I added 2,500 square feet of strawberry plants. The plants thrived.

In July, the plants supported what I thought would be well over a gallon of ripe berries. Pick them tomorrow, I thought, when they're at the peak of ripeness.

The temperature dropped to sixteen degrees that night, and the berries froze and weren't good. That frost finished all the blossoms and all the developing fruit, though it didn't hurt the plants. There wasn't time before fall for another crop to mature, even if the weather was ideal. I let our goat, Jewel, eat that strawberry patch.

There are techniques that can help plants make it through severe weather, cloche gardening and greenhouses, for example, but ranch work, cutting and selling firewood, helping teach and raise our daughters, and writing, gave me as full a

schedule as I wanted, so I planted crops that would survive some frost.

We grow fine carrots, cabbages, garlic, lettuce, spinach, kale. Peas about half the time. Sometimes a heavy-enough frost comes and kills the peas, but peas are little enough work that I always plant them and hope. If they frost, and it's early enough in growing season, I plant them again.

Our first year here, I mulched the garden heavily in the fall. All through our first winter, I shoveled aside snow, moved hay, and harvested carrots, onions, kale, and lettuce. When the snow melted, we were still eating and appreciating fresh vegetables from the garden.

The second year, I planted large areas and mulched them when cold weather started. We had stored enough vegetables in the keep house that I didn't begin to dig through snow and hay after vegetables until well into the winter. By then, voles, mice, and ground squirrels had discovered the bounty and had been making their own harvest. I harvested only three or four pounds of carrots, a few onions, three or four bulbs of garlic, no lettuce, no kale.

We already had two cats, but when Laura, Juniper and Amanda told me about two cats needing a home and asked me if they could bring them home, I said, "Sure. Do it. Maybe they'll thin the rodent populations enough that we can keep vegetables in the garden in the winter."

People abandoned cats along the road. When winter hit, cats showed up at our door and asked for help. One cat had kittens. By the time the snow was two feet deep, we had eighteen cats, which was more than I wanted even in my most generous mood. Laura set up feeding stations and put several boxes with old rags and rugs in them in the shop. Only a favored few were allowed in the house. Allowing more than a few in led to cat fights and other messy problems in the house.

We had messy problems around the shop anyway, since the cats wouldn't go far from their shelter and there was nothing to dig in but snow. When the snow melted, it was an odoriferous place for a while, but we still had vegetables in the garden.

We started looking for homes for some of the cats. The people at the animal shelter said they could usually place kittens in homes, so we left some of the kittens there. We gave cats to anyone who would take them. Some of the cats left voluntarily as spring put voles, mice, and ground-squirrels into action.

I revised the irrigation and flooded most of the near habitat for rodents. Our three remaining cats kept control of what

habitat was left.

Our fourth year of gardening, we lost the garden to grasshoppers. I was cutting hay in early fall. I had dried all the ditches off. I had dug a well near the garden, but the pump I had then was very difficult to prime. Laura couldn't manage it at all, and it was only with a lot of work that I was ever able to get it pumping. So we hauled water from the kitchen in buckets, and we didn't get enough water to the garden.

Where there are other things to eat, grasshoppers will not eat much of thoroughly-watered garden plants. But if a garden begins to dry out, they will attack in force, and that's what they did, until there wasn't any garden left.

I found it fascinating to study what had been the garden. Where onions had grown, only perfect, onion-shaped holes remained. Grasshoppers had eaten every crop level with the ground. They ate roots of any size down into the ground several inches.

The next year, I didn't plant a garden. I was busy ranching and cutting wood, and feeding the grasshoppers once seemed like enough. And all summer, every time I walked through the garden area and at meals, I wished I had planted.

So the next year, I bought a small, self-priming pump, and I planted a small area, with very good soil, close to the house. I didn't know it yet, but the job would end and we would move in the fall. It seemed right that our last garden in Whitney Valley was a really good, very productive garden.

There were problems we had to overcome to keep it growing, but that is as it should be when gardening in the mountains of northeastern Oregon. We had all the hardy vegetables we could use, and when we left, carrots still grew in the garden. My brother went out and harvested some of them.

Do I regret all the soil I built up and couldn't use, all the vegetables and canes and trees I planted that didn't survive? No. I never had to join a gym and exercise indoors, with machines, to stay in shape. I learned a lot about gardens, about plants, about life.

Every vegetable, every fruit we harvested from that garden, we deeply appreciated, because we knew it was something rare, a delicious survivor of Whitney Valley's extreme conditions.