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Raising Five to Garden

When I was ten, we lived on Cedar Flats, turn right at the McKenzie Bridge on the way out of The Willamette Valley in Oregon.

For me, the garden and the spring, our water supply, was where that summer centered. Mom's five children carried water up the steep trail from the spring to the garden. We carried buckets, and two or three of us working together carried a small tub. No giggling, because giggling usually spills water, and nobody wants to spill water we've hauled that far. We poured the water into a large tub in the garden, and Mom watered from that tub. We trusted her not to waste water.

Life at the spring, the force of life populating the mountain with densely growing trees, flowers, grasses, and myriad wild animals dominated the mountain. The mountain rose behind our house, which sat above a sharp rise on a flat area. Cedar Flats provided room for a dog on a chain that ran along an overhead wire and then room for a huge garden. Beyond the garden, the mountain rose and resumed its full-time business of raising a dense, varied forest. Our dog ran down to the spring and back up again and around the garden with five children, or several of five, depending on schedules. Something had to be very important to earn anyone absence when the crew carried water.

Cloistered under trees, surrounded by soft green brush, grasses, moss, and ferns, water from our spring pooled clean in moss and rocks for our careful dipping. Five children, from 6 to 13, carried a lot of water.

Mom said, "We'll cover this area with burlap sacks, and we'll keep the sacks damp. In about two weeks, carrots will sprout." We watered the burlap daily. Secret processes took place in the darkness under the burlap that slowed the evaporation of water. Two weeks after Mom carefully planted the tiny carrot seeds, we peeled back the burlap and found sprouted carrot tops, yellow from lack of sunlight, but greening rapidly as they grew toward the sun.

Mom lured us to work with enthusiasm by showing us that the garden demonstrated the fascinating processes of life and that we participated in those processes by raking, planting, weeding, and hauling water. Dry, seemingly inert seeds, carefully planted, watered and tended, sprouted, reached for sunlight, and grew rapidly into succulently-edible vegetables.

If no one else understood the glories of garlic fresh from the ground, that didn't concern us. We five children ate green, growing garlic the way some eat scallions. We started eating garlic as a dare amongst us, but we all liked it once we tried it. Mom had to declare garlic a protected vegetable to get any to cook with.

Through spring, summer, and fall that year, we hauled a lake of water a hundred yards up a steep hill. We needed garlic power, carrot power, lettuce power, the power of freshly hulled peas, and corn, raw from the cob. All thinnings became food for children, and we ate them right in the garden. Mom's friends had questioned her wisdom, starting such a large garden that far from water, but the growing interest and appetites of her children proved her sagacity.

None of us had liked vegetables at the table much, but vegetables so fresh they were dirty, grown from water we carried up the hill, washed in water we hauled up the hill, before we spread that water over other vegetables still growing toward the sun, that was food of a different color than vegetables out of a can at the table. Almost everything was good. If one of us didn't like one vegetable, somebody else did.

Carrots grow a long time before they gain any size. We ate radishes, lettuce, spinach, peas, kohlrabi, and strawberries before we pulled and ate the first small carrots. Once I ate carrots right from the garden, I always liked fresh, carefully grown, carefully watered carrots. We loved rain that sometimes poured down from the generous sky and released us from water hauling duties to run to other adventures.

Dad might have gotten around to stringing an electric wire down the hill, the way he promised, and he might have installed a pump to pump water to the garden the next summer. But he worked construction and followed the jobs, and we moved from Cedar Flats that winter.

We took boxes full of jars of food that Mom preserved, hot afternoons

in a steamy kitchen. She filled boiled jars with hot tomatoes, corn, beans, beets, and other vegetables. Every time we ate food Mom had preserved, there was the garden again, with beautiful shades of living colors on the flat below dense green forest rising steeply toward blue sky, and there we were, in my memory as clear as sunlight and flowing spring water, hauling clean, cold water up the steep trail, learning about the wonder of life in ways that will last all our lives.