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A FAMILY GARDEN

by

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EVERY man ought to raise a garden. It should either be small enough for his wife to take care of between washing the breakfast dishes and starting the noon meal, or large enough to hire somebody else to take care of it.

So far as I am concerned, nothing in between will do. Not even in the face of advice by agricultural college garden experts and home economists, whose excellent recommendations you can obtain free for the asking.

For example, they tell us that each family garden should be carefully planned on paper, with so many 25-foot rows planted to these vegetables and so many 50-foot rows planted to others. This, they calculate, will produce an abundance of green stuff for table use in season, perhaps some to sell, and certainly plenty to can a specified number of quarts of vegetables per family member.

The idea is, of course, that the entire family should have a part in the growing of the garden, and the entire family share in the luxury it is bound to provide.

Now I'm not condemning the idea. I think it is fine, but my experience has been that it just doesn't work out that way. The practical application of so many quarts canned per 25-foot row has always come up short in quantity, just like the tomatoes lack the quality of the luscious red fruit six inches in diameter that they picture in the seed catalogues.

And as for the family helping to cultivate the garden, well, I guess that depends on the family. Gardening certainly is a desirable family activity, but before I get into another gardening season, I want it clearly understood, underscored, and emphasized that the family part includes some of the work. In the past, it has always been Daddy who digs.

The business all starts on a winter evening when Dad is toasting his toes in comfort before the fire. Mom rouses him from a snooze to show him a picture or two

in the array of seed catalogues, printed in full and glorious color, which she has secretly written for. The owners of these seed houses apparently live in the Garden of Eden and assume that everyone else does, for they are simply bursting with optimism about the wealth of good food that is practically yours for the asking.

"Don't you think we ought to raise a garden in that corner out there?" Mom asks. "Everything is getting so high in the stores, and we could save a lot on the grocery bill. Besides, it would be a good thing for the youngsters. They could help, and learn a lot just by watching things grow."

Dad grunts and thumbs through the catalogue. Mom talks on, emphasizing the economy angle and the illusion that the youngsters will help. Before Dad realizes what he is doing, he has his pencil and is filling out the order blank. Plans for growing a world of the family's favorite vegetables are laid out (usually with the rows too close together), and the plans often include even a few vegetables the family doesn't care much for, such as spinach, because they look so good in the seed catalogue.

Generally overlooked is the fact that fertility of the soil is fundamental in growing a good garden. Good seed alone won't do the job. Preparation really should begin in the fall, with some rich barnyard manure turned under. Lacking this, use of a well-balanced commercial garden fertilizer at planting time is essential.

There is the report from one Oklahoma farmer who planted a dime's worth of beans on some well-fertilized land in late spring and then got lost for two weeks in the vines, but that is undoubtedly a gross exaggeration. He probably just used that as an excuse to get away from the house and some other chores for a while.

In the family garden it usually is concluded that since the soil produced such abundant weeds in the past, it ought to produce luxuriant vegetables in the future.

So the mistake of not adding fertilizer is frequently made on the excuse that it costs too much. To be more truthful, it probably is because nobody thought of it in time or because nobody wanted to fool with the smelly stuff.

The seed arrive, however, and the first warm sunshiny day of spring Dad is out with a spading fork and the whole family is enthusiastically trying to do in one afternoon all that he neglected doing in the way of preparation in months before.

There is the friendly feeling of spring in the air. The sight of neighbors in a similar state of ecstasy also wielding spading forks, hoes, and rakes is inspiring.

Mom has on her big hat, work gloves, and a radiant appearance as she flutters about suggesting changes, such as that the onions be planted over here next to the petunias instead of next to the potatoes. Dad's feeble objection that she is mixing him and the garden all up are overruled and the feminine notions prevail.

The youngsters are dashing about in an effort to help, but the garden makes progress in spite of it. Each wants to plant his own little garden or to claim a particular section of the main garden. Mom beams; the children are taking such a nice interest and are learning so much about farming.

Everything is lovely in the spring time, but Dad does the digging.

Soon here comes the lady next door to

warch—and advise. Mom pauses for a half hour or so to visit with her. By then it is time for her to start supper. The momentary relaxation of effort during the visit give the youngsters the opportunity they were looking for. They have mysteriously disappeared in search of other activities which promise more entertainment and less work.

So Dad does the rest of the planting, too.

In due time, green shoots begin to appear. Family interest in the garden revives momentarily. Just long enough to discover there are some weeds to be pulled and some hoeing to be done. Again the fair-weather farmers are off to diverse occupations.

So Dad does the cultivating.

Eventually, mustard greens appear on the table. They are not quite as large or elegant as those in the catalogue, but they are edible. Likewise, some radishes, somewhat misshapen and off color, perhaps, but still radishes. And onions, slightly undersized, but think what that many would have cost in the grocery store!

Dad recalls what they cost in hand blisters and backaches. And he wonders.

By that time, hot weather is at hand and the garden as a family activity has practically ceased to exist. It is strictly Dad's garden by now. If it needs watering, he does it. If it needs hoeing, the rest of the

family always has other business, very pressing.

Of course, Dad is the expert on gardening anyhow. He has learned an infallible rule by which he can tell a vegetable plant from a weed. When he finds a strange plant, he pulls it up; if it comes up again, it was a weed.

As the tomatoes are getting ripe (not as big and round and red as those in the pictures, but ripe), the weather really is getting warm. Dad has all but ceased to struggle with the weeds. When he comes home in the evening, picks a few peas or beans and sizes up the work that needs to be done in the garden, he often finds that he has a convenient meeting to attend at the church or downtown.

As autumn comes on, the family garden again becomes attractive to other members of the family, especially when company drops in. The kids refer to it as "our garden," boasting about the beans they helped plant or the onions they helped pull. Mom proudly displays the quarts (or pints) of vegetables she has canned, pointing out again how much they will save on next winter's grocery bill.

