

Gardening in Georgia

Scent, Soil, & Tomato Sandwiches

In our neighborhood, my dad was known for his tomatoes. Although he sometimes grew peas, broccoli, and the occasional bush variety cucumber, tomatoes were his gig. He loved them. He loved them sliced with mayo, and salt and pepper on white bread. He loved them in a BLT (bacon, lettuce, & tomato) like nobody's business. I loved them too and ate many sandwiches alongside him during my childhood surviving Georgia summers.

I lost my dad in 2005, and each summer since, I have, with some success and many failures, tried my hand at growing vegetables, including his beloved tomatoes. The smell of a tomato plant transports me back to my dad's garden with one whiff-a sort of bitter sweetness.

Now, he did things in his garden differently than I do in mine. He used chemicals to grow and protect his beloved maters-after all it was the 1980s. I, on the other hand, am an organic grower who composts all kitchen manner, uses cow manure, and fertilizes with fish emulsion. My dad would never have understood the work I put in before a plant or seed ever finds its way into the soil.

I am a plant fanatic with a front yard full of flowers, fruit trees, and vines, and of course the vegetable beds. My dad would have cringed to know my tomatoes and cucumber vines are in full view of those walking down the sidewalk.

He was still alive when my husband and I bought our first home in downtown Milledgeville and was mortified when we proceeded to pull up most of our lawn in favor of flower beds. "That's a lot of work to keep up," I remember him saying. Still, in our 20s at the time, we had no idea how true his words would ring nearly twenty years later.

I must admit that my journey in vegetable gardening has been far more challenging than flower cultivation. Heat, bugs, drought and rot have taken its toll year after year, but still, I persist. I forge on due to the image of a Southern icon clinching bare soil in her hands and vowing never to allow hunger to besiege her kinfolks, again-Scarlet O'Hara, of course.

Please be assured that my pantry is full and we have not ever faced such tire straights as Scarlet-bless her heart. Although I am a frequent shopper at our local grocery stores, I have developed a love of, as we say here, "putting up food."

My mother froze many a pint of dad's tomatoes, but never ventured into canning. I, on the other hand, enjoy water bath and pressure canning fruit jams, all sorts of tomato sauces, syrups, and vegetables. I love the satisfaction it brings when viewing my lauder lined up neatly in a cupboard. My mother tells me great-grandmother Ida, who I take after in so many ways, would be very proud of my accomplishments. My husband is just glad that I've not blown the house to bits while fostering the new hobby.

Our Beautiful City

I am one of those individuals who came to Milledgeville as a college freshman and never left. Each fall, I would be welcomed back to campus by a sweet and distinct smell that engulfed the downtown area. For many years, I never knew what produced the scent that I only associated with this beautiful town and returning to academia.

As a beginning gardener, I found myself acquainted with the producer of the fragrance-the Tea Olive. This small tree, that many sculpt into a shrub, is one of my favorite all-time plants that I cannot live without. Smells are powerful triggers for memory; the scent of the Tea Olive will forever invoke memories of fall days spent on the porch of Terrell Hall.

Our town has always taken great pride in beautification efforts, including the preservation of historical properties and the adornment of the downtown business district with ornamental plantings. It is what makes Milledgeville a great place to visit and call home.

"Keeping the city beautiful is of utmost importance in attracting visitors, businesses, students, and new residents to our community," observes Mayor Gary Thrower. "Maintaining an attractive environment to live in serves multiple purposes, including keeping current inhabitants happy in their hometown."

Great pride is taken by many who work to maintain the positive face of our town. "The City of Milledgeville Public Works department has a dedicated staff that clean downtown thoroughly each morning and work to maintain the area," added Carlee Schulte, executive director of Milledgeville Main Street. "These efforts are so important to keep a great looking downtown that we can all be proud of."

When Gardening Is Social

I certainly would be remiss when writing this article if I did not mention the history and achievements of gardening clubs that have contributed so much to our community. One such troop, the Milledgeville Garden Club (MGC), is believed to be the third such group to be organized in Georgia-founded in 1929 by Nelle Womack Hines.

Many current members carry on family gardening legacies by participating in the MGC and work to preserve beautification efforts in our town. I had the privilege of attending the February meeting of the club, held at Lockerly Arboretum, and was received with warm welcomes by both familiar and new faces.

Glancing through scrapbooks, I realized the magnitude of the club's contributions over their long history. Just a few of their many achievements include having Milledgeville designated as a Tree City, the beautification of downtown during the 1996 Olympic Summer Games, assisting with upkeep and planting at Memory Hill Cemetery and Lockerly, and decorating the Governor's Mansion for the holiday season.

The Old Capitol Garden Club (OCGC), organized in 1995, came together for the set purpose of promoting the love of gardening and studying horticulture. "After 20 years, the goals are still being met," says Diane Sargent. "We have studied orchids, bees, natural plants of Georgia, how to plant in our yard, how to help the community, and all aspects of horticulture."

This group is also very active in our town by making life more beautiful for residents. Just a few of their many projects involve activities at the Georgia War Veterans Home and Lockerly Arboretum, including decorating the arboretum's Rose Hill mansion for the holidays.

Sargent observes, "I think our greatest contribution is to the community. Our increased knowledge of Georgia plants, gardening methods, and historical history of Georgia horticulture spreads throughout our community because of our members and does not stay just with the group."

Whether you choose to garden alone or with others, the pursuit is worthwhile. After all, it is cheaper than therapy and you get tomatoes-or in my case, a mighty fine mater sandwich. To follow my gardening successes and challenges, please log onto my blog at www.sowingasimpleharvest.com. I would love to have you drop by!