

Growing Generations of Food

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When I was about six years old, I helped my mother dig the small vegetable patch in her yard behind the garage. At least, I attempted to

help. In reality, my shovel fruitlessly hit clods of hard earth a few times before I stopped to rest and eye the variable English sky.

I don't know how she turned the scrubby grass and weeds into rich earth, but I vividly remember the food it produced: tender young zucchini sautéed in butter, gnarly carrots with funny twisted limbs, green beans raw and crisp, eaten straight from the vine as I watched her weed.

I was never much help, but I enjoyed the fruits of her labor. That was probably half the point of my mom gardening in the first place—getting us kids to eat our vegetables—along with some stress relief from life as a divorced mom.

Her garden, small as it was, made a lasting impression. I've promptly set up one of my own as the first order of business wherever I've lived.

In the North Carolina wilderness I felled trees to make a sunny patch of earth; garden beds built from fallen logs and unearthed rock. At an upstairs upstate New York apartment I hauled salvaged pallets from the public market and a hundred pounds of soil onto my second story deck to build raised beds. When I bought my first house, I hauled it all back down again and turned half the tiny yard into vegetable production.

It's all been for the same cause as my mother's garden. I love to put my hands in the earth and grow food. And now that I have kids, I want them to their eat fruits and vegetables, too.

Years ago, I had dreams of living a sustainable life, producing everything I needed on 10 acres of off-grid land. Today, I don't expect to grow more than a fraction of my family's food. Our garden consists of four raised beds and a small sunny stretch along one fence. We have a few fruit trees in the front yard and tubs of berries on the deck.

Still, there's something about creating your own food, no matter how little or how much, from seed to food to compost. Being part of the life cycle keeps me grounded through busy days. Plus, it's a family tradition I'm passing on to my kids. As I grew them in my belly, I dreamed of the things we'd do together, of the skills and culture I'd pass on from my childhood. I would read to them, teach them to cook and, of course, show them how to grow food.

The first time my son helped me plant green beans my heart soared. He was only a toddler; he grabbed too many seeds at once with his pudgy little hands and they spilled onto the soil. I crouched beside him in the garden, handing them to him one by one as he doggedly poked each one into its hole and gently covered it up.

"We water them now, Mama?" he asked as he stood up, rubbing dirt-covered hands on his pants. His eyes shone with accomplishment as he turned the hose on the newly planted beds.

My growing your food = loving to eat vegetables ploy doesn't always work. Sometimes the kids won't eat the food they've helped to grow. But more often than not, as they play in the yard, they'll casually snack on snap peas and kale and gobble up ripe raspberries. When I catch them, I smile. Raising kids is a long game, after all.

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While I don't get out into my vegetable garden as often as I'd like, when I do, the kids often join me. Gardening teaches them a basic survival skill, should they ever need it, and *where* food comes from -- a thing we largely take for granted. It gives me hope for another generation of gardeners. My son, now nine, still likes to plant and eat green beans and my seven-year-old daughter is much better at weeding than I ever was. Hands plunged in the soft dark soil, I feel connected through the earth, to the generations before and after me.