

Weathering Life's Storms by Rooting Children in a Garden

It was a comfortable August day years ago when my mom herded my sister and me out the back door and into the garden. Working my way through knee-high weeds wasn't the ideal summer activity for a grade-schooler like myself, but the three of us kept at it, finally stopping to lie in the grass under a shady tree to rest.

After a bit, the others fell asleep and I got inspired. Why not hop back into the weed patch and see how much progress I could make before Mom woke up? My venture was successful, and I had the pleasure of surprising my mother with my labor of love.

In retrospect, the surprise was on me, for I think back on that day as the one in which my interest in [gardening](#) began to grow. Today, as I pull thistles out of the raspberry patch and dig up extra chive plants to give to friends, I'm grateful that my mom had me get down and dirty in the garden while I was still young, for the lessons I've learned there are valuable, shaping ones necessary for any child maturing into adulthood.

Diligence and Responsibility

"Way to go, Annie!" various neighbors shouted as I wrestled the tiller, turning over the soil to get ready for another year. It was a new experience for me, as my dad, who always did this initial muscle work was sidelined due to a broken collarbone. I didn't have enough upper body strength to move it forward, so I got creative and walked backward, pulling the tiller as I went. My muscles felt like I'd been hit by a car after that experience, but there was great joy in having stepped up, taken responsibility for a difficult task, and

seen it through to completion.

But children don't have to maneuver the tiller through the ground in order to learn this lesson. Tending a garden naturally lends itself to a lesson in responsibility and diligence, as the plants won't take root, the weeds will choke out the plants, and the fruit will rot on the vine unless children put in the time and do the hard work of nurturing and harvesting. The beautiful thing about a garden is that it gives tangible rewards, demonstrating to children that their hard work does pay off.

Generosity and Neighborliness

One summer day at the height of the tomato harvest, our old Italian neighbor, who, to my childlike mind was rather intimidating with his gruff, mafia-esque voice, made his way up the driveway and alongside our garden. Trying to be friendly, my mom offered him a few tomatoes from the bin in which she was collecting them. Misunderstanding, he took the whole bin from her and trotted home.

Our family was a bit aghast at the loss of our biggest crop, and yes, let's be honest, a bit resentful. The incident, however, was a good lesson in swallowing that resentment and choosing instead to be generous, good neighbors to someone who didn't have many friends. That generosity boomeranged back to us as we saw that old man soften and grow friendly and even generous toward our family in return.

While our Italian friend probably offered the most difficult lesson in generosity and neighborliness from our garden, others have been much easier. Working outside naturally encourages neighbors to stop and talk while on a walk, even coming into the yard to see the growth of a certain plant, all while building the community relationships that are often non-existent today. And how can a generous gift of a squash fresh off the vine or some garden carrots not help but strengthen

those bonds?

Peaceful Contemplation

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of a garden, however, is the time for peaceful contemplation that it brings. Children are forced to get away from the TV, computer, and phone when they work with the earth and actually have time to breathe free, dream dreams, and process life's problems—I know, as I have done a fair amount of praying, crying, and thinking in my own garden. Today, our nation and society are full of noise, and giving children a chance to get away from it all and revel in the simple hard work that built America, even in their own backyard, is a worthwhile goal.

That's what author Whittaker Chambers was aiming at when he moved his family out of the city and to their own farm in the mid-20th century. Chambers, an ex-communist spy who later testified in Congress about the subversive communist activities taking place in the United States, wrote about that farm life in his autobiography "[Witness](#)":

To give such life to children no sacrifice is too great. But we did not mean only to root our children in the soil. Above all, we meant to root them in the nation—that part of the nation each of whose days is a great creative labor. That is the part of the nation to which by choice I belong. The farm is the soil, in which, like my children, I spread my roots.

Chambers goes on to say, "In the age of crisis, the farm has been our way of trying to give our children what peace and security is left in the world." He and his wife hoped such an experience would give their children "the inner strength to face the years ahead."

Given today's world, our children will likely face difficult times ahead, and it's our responsibility to prepare them for those difficult times. Many of us can't give our children the

farm, but it's feasible to give them a bit of earth to till and tend. And in doing so, perhaps we, like Chambers, will instill not only the skills, but also the knowledge, character, desire, and ability to withstand the storms of life that will inevitably come.

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