



PUTTING DOWN ROOTS

BY SCOTT DODD

S THERE SUCH A THING AS onion grass?" I asked my father over the phone. "Because if

there is, I think I've got an awful lot of it." It was mid-March, and a deluge of cold rain had finally cleared my new backyard of the snow, ice, and slush that had covered it since before Christmas.

All through this especially harsh North Jersey

winter—our first in the little gray house with the green shutters—I had been eyeing a particular spot near the back porch to plant a vegetable garden with my young son. It got plenty of sunlight, and the outdoor spigot was close enough that I wouldn't have to drag a hose across the yard every day to keep it watered.

This weekend had provided my first chance to sink a shovel into the dark, moist dirt and begin tilling. But I'd quickly found myself at war with a foul-smelling plant with bright green stalks and bulbous roots that had laid claim to the same swath where I intended to sink tomato plants and carrot seeds. The gardening books that I'd curled up with on cold winter nights called this "getting to know your soil."

I was encouraged by the fact that my chosen plot clearly supported life (the dozing earthworms I'd disturbed also seemed like a good sign), but I was starting to feel a little bad about evicting the current occupants, noxious-smelling as most of them were. After all, my wife and I had bought this house only the previous summer, and I knew that the prior owner had used this same spot to plant flowers and ornamental herbs. As I attacked the onion grass and encountered the thick roots of other plants waiting to spring from the earth, I felt a mild pang of regret. Who was I, the new guy, to say they had to go, when clearly they had such a hold on the place?

Still, I kept digging. I was determined to take up vegetable gardening, in part to establish what the more philosophical of my books called a "connection to the earth." But I was also seeking a connection to my past and, I hoped, to my future as a husband, father, property owner, and all-around responsible adult. My growing sense of putting down roots—my feeling that this house represented not a temporary stopping point but a long-term relationship—was something novel for me. As a kid I'd moved with my family every few years, my father's job taking us to places as varied as New Orleans, Tulsa, and Pittsburgh, where my parents finally settled. It wasn't until college that I spent four straight years in the same school, and I can't picture what any of my many bedrooms looked like in all those different houses.

But wherever we went, Dad would always pick out a spot in the backyard to plant his vegetables. It was one of the few constants and comforts in a childhood dogged by too many intimidating lunch tables in too many new school cafeterias. Now, with a house and family of my own, I wanted to build memories with my son, Henry—who turned 2 in early March—like the ones I have of helping out my dad. I wanted to trace furrows in the dirt together and drop in seeds; to keep out pernicious weeds and trespassing rabbits; to cheer when that first tiny green tomato appeared on the vine and wait impatiently for it to turn crimson and ready to pluck.

During our phone chat, my dad told me that his gardens had served as a source of relaxation over the years, a welcome break from the high stress of the office. But the joy of raising his own food had also given him a special tie to the earth, one that sitting at a desk all day never could. Now that I was the one with the job and the kid and the mortgage payments and the leaky basement, I was hoping for the same. And I was hoping my own son would get a sense of it, too.

Even if the joy-in-growing thing didn't speak to him right away, I was pretty sure the food would. When I was a kid, it was all my

parents could do to get me to eat vegetables, but I was crazy over the tomatoes that came right out of the garden. One of my favorite late-summer dinners was—and still is—a BLT sandwich. Half the time we'd eat them without even bothering with the B or the L. As long as the tomatoes were sweet and juicy, and the toast sufficiently dressed with mayo and salt, we were happy with them just like that. My dad's fresh corn on the cob wasn't half bad, either.

One of the books I'd read over winter informed me that vegetable gardens have declined in popularity over the past few decades, passed over for ornamental lawns and flower beds. Curious about the shift, I called Bruce Butterfield, research director for the National Gardening Association, who has

tracked interest in food gardening since 1978. While it's true that vegetable gardening had been on the wane for a while, he said, that's beginning to change: 2009 showed one of the biggest upticks he's seen in his career. The annual surveys commissioned by Butterfield indicated that 43 million U.S. households planned to grow some of their own food in 2009, up 19 percent from the previous year. The numbers stayed pretty much the same in 2010.

You might recall that 2009 was the year Michelle Obama tilled the South Lawn to plant her own vegetable garden—the first at the White House since Eleanor Roosevelt's, during World War II—and I wondered if the growing cultural interest in healthy eating, fighting obesity, and eating local had anything to do with Butterfield's rebounding numbers. He said all of those factors probably helped, as did that perennial style shaper: the economy. When it's good, people worry about how their grass looks. When it's bad, they start thinking about how they can use their yards to help feed their kids. There's also a psychological aspect. When the rest of the world feels out of control, Butterfield said, "people at least want to feel that they can control what happens in their own backyard."

SHORT TAKE

Growing Together

PAIGE SMITH ORLOFF WASN'T ALWAYS A GARDENER. When she lived in Los Angeles, says the former HBO executive, she regularly killed houseplants. Four years ago, Orloff moved to upstate New York, where she now spends several hours a day planting, harvesting, cooking, and canning her own food, much of it with the help of her two young children. Visit Orloff's new blog, "In the Weeds," at onearth.org, for weekly updates on her adventures in living cleaner, greener, and closer to the ground.

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Unfortunately, the more I worked on my garden plans, the less in control I felt. Despite my fond childhood memories, it had been more than two decades since I'd lived in a house with a yard. How was I supposed to deal with all those acorns embedded in the grass? Or the weeds and ivy choking the flower beds? I went back to my books, then ordered a few seed catalogs and debated whether to buy that soil-testing kit I'd seen at Home Depot. My reading told me

that proper planning is essential to making sure that plants get enough space, nutrients, and sunlight to prosper. So one day, looking nothing like a gardener, I trudged into the backyard armed with graph paper, a mechanical pencil, and a tape measure. The plot was six feet by ten, I dutifully recorded. There

were 108 inches from the knotted stump to the paving stone, and 16 inches from the corner of the back porch to the rose bushes. As April crept closer and spring showed little sign of arriving, I sketched out dozens of possible configurations for my rows, planting on paper what the cold soil wasn't yet ready to receive.

A week after the conversation with my dad, I could wait no longer. I grabbed my seed starter kit and interrupted Henry at his train table. Did he want to come out on the porch and help me plant? I'd been telling him about my garden plans all winter, even describing those bacon- and lettuceless sandwiches to get him interested, but I don't think he had any clue what I was talking about. How could he? This was my first chance to show him. Snug in our fleece hoodies, we sat side by side with the kit before us on the patio table. "Look," I told him, pulling a white speck from the seed packet, "this is a tomato seed." His brown eyes grew wide as I pushed it deep into the wet soil and out of sight. "And these are peppers." I showed him the slightly larger, yellowish seeds. He tried to grab some and knocked them off the table, so I put a few in my palm and let him pluck at them one by one. "Dirty," he said, following my lead and pushing them into the soil. "That's right," I replied. "We're getting our hands dirty."

"How are you guys doing?" my wife asked as she came through the door to check on our progress.

"Tell Mommy what we're planting," I said.

Henry pointed to the big red tomato pictured on the packet and confidently proclaimed: "Apple."

Okay, so maybe I hadn't yet passed on any profound wisdom to my son. But as I'd learned from my father all those years ago, these things take time. Right at that moment, poking seeds into the starter soil, I couldn't have cared less if I ever got anything to sprout from my meticulously measured plot. I knew I was planting more important seeds out there on the back porch of our new home, and even if Henry couldn't yet tell a Red Delicious from a Roma, I could already feel them taking root. 🌱

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