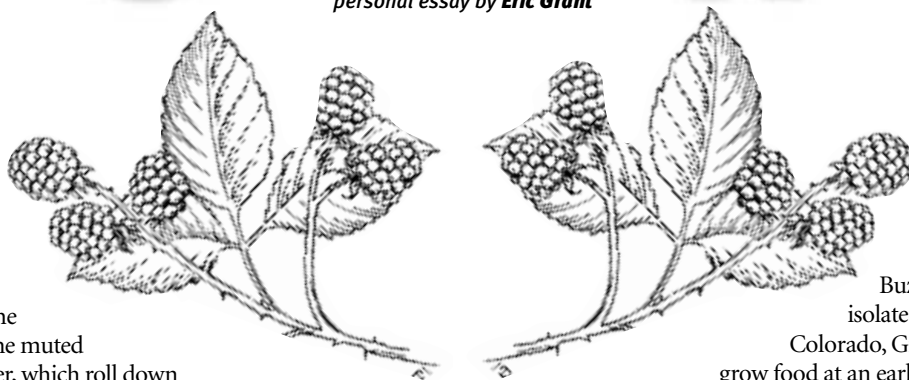


GRANDMA'S GARDEN

personal essay by *Eric Grant*



Fifteen miles south of home, a thunderhead begins to build above the Flat Top Mountains. The muted rumblings of its thunder, which roll down the valley toward us, announce its pending arrival.

Everything seems to take cover. The hummingbirds streak for the neighbor's pine tree. My dog, Jane, heads for shelter in the house. But I remain in the garden, knee-deep in corn, watching the black clouds boil and roll, as lightning strikes the ridge above town.

For all of its drama, the storm is welcome, something we've needed since early June. It's dry here this summer, perhaps too dry to presume that we can grow lettuce, radishes and onions under these conditions.

Gardening at an elevation of 8,000 feet is always a challenge, with moments of joy and days chock-full of disappointment. I'm not sure why we even till ground each year, let alone sow seeds. But we do anyway. Hope is something that always overcomes us.

Maybe this year will be different.

Joy in the challenge

Just this summer, we froze out on June 10, then got snow the next day. It turned dry later that month, and not much rain has fallen since. I'm keenly aware that I have about 45 more days before fall's first frosts creep down the mountains and less than three months from knee-deep snow.

But the risk of gardening is part of the fun. It represents a psychological victory over the cold, a summertime struggle between the forces of life and death. It's a

thrill to tempt nature, to see just how long we can trick the gods of winter before they march back down the mountain and put this valley under their icy control.

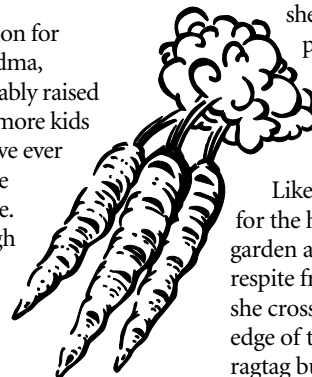
For this reason, we anticipate summers unlike people who live in more hospitable climates. In March, a few months after cabin fever has set in, we scour the seed catalogs for ideal short-season corn, short-season cucumbers and short-season squash.

Everything must be short-season.

We think about all the fortunate folks in the flatlands who've by now gotten their gardens tilled and their seeds sown. By April, we've planned out where we will plant each row. By early May, a week or two after the snow finally has melted, we plant the cool-season vegetables.

A master

I earned my appreciation for gardening from my grandma, Josephine Hill, who probably raised more vegetables and fed more kids than just about anyone I've ever known. She, too, faced the challenges of high altitude. But her gardens — though she gasped each year "This garden is my worst ever" — were beautiful, tranquil and productive places.



Born near the banks of Buzzard Creek in the isolated reaches of western

Colorado, Grandma learned to grow food at an early age. Her father, a descendant of hardy Norwegian stock who liked winter, had a gift for raising raspberries, and Grandma had long rows of those berries in all of her gardens, planted next to her peas, beans and potatoes.

Grandma attended college as a young woman, earned a degree in education, and taught in a one-room schoolhouse the year

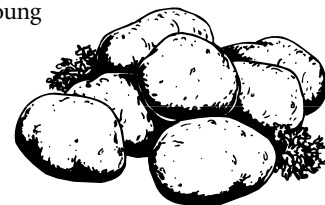
she met my grandpa. Together, they raised five kids in a log cabin that had no running water or electricity. It was post-Depression living, a time of personal sacrifice, but she provided her family with comfort, confidence and self-assurance.

In middle age, she became afflicted with arthritis. The joints in her hands swelled and became disfigured, and I often

wondered how much she suffered when she clutched the handle of a hoe or pruned the apricot tree. She rarely let any of us know just how deep the pain really was.

Place to teach

Like me, Grandma didn't care much for the hot days of summer, but her garden always seemed a cool, welcome respite from the ranch house. And when she crossed through the white gate on the edge of the yard and into the garden, a ragtag bunch of barnyard cats, a dog or two — maybe even a chicken — and a half





rests the promise of rebirth; the highest aspirations of the new, green season; and the contentment of a harvest fulfilled. Yet, winter is ever-present up here, and all that could be soon will cease to exist on some September morning when the first frost sets in.

I miss my grandma and the quiet ease of her garden. So I plant peas and beans and raspberries in her memory. These things connect me with her life, and I am certain that, in some way, her presence provides much of the heart and soul for my own garden.

I wouldn't have it any other way. On this evening, the thunderhead now has moved into the valley, and I feel the pitter-patter of raindrops on my shoulders. It increases in intensity as I head for shelter in the house. "This'll be a good rain," I think to myself with all the robust optimism of the world. "This'll be the rain that makes the difference."



dozen overly ambitious grandkids accompanied her.

She taught us how to hoe weeds, to pick peas and raspberries, and to run water from the main ditch down the long rows of vegetables. Armed with shovels and hoes, my cousins and I moved with purpose through the garden, hacking away at anything that didn't look like a vegetable plant. We coaxed water down creases but usually ended up building small dams for mud fights.

I know we probably wore her patience pretty thin. But it was good work for little kids. The house was nearby for a cold glass of water when we needed it, and (when no one was looking) there were abundant sweet peas or a handful of raspberries to pop into our mouths.

When Grandma died a year and a half ago, the garden where she spent so much of her life became an empty, unattended place.

I've come to realize just how much presence and meaning she and her garden gave all of us. I often think that those who believe the world would be a much better place without people in it should come and visit Grandma's garden. With her gone, so too is the very heart and soul of the place.

Building connections

My son, Ryan, and I try to spend an hour or two each evening in our own garden. I've come to believe that it is the best place for a good boy to build a foundation for manhood, and it's good to see him develop his own, personal connection to a small piece of ground and the plants that grow in it.

He's learned that gardening isn't just about food, although he devours lettuce and carrots by the basketful.

No, he knows it's much more than that. Every garden has a beginning, a middle and an end. And in each garden