

“GARDENS AND GARLIC”

By Frank W. Santucci

Every spring of my life, starting in 1941, my father and mother would complement the warm sun with their planting skills. Willie, as he was known, would plant his loving tomatoes and pepper plants and treat them with such love that I felt the plants were part of our living family. Lizzie, my mom, complemented the property with her uncanny ability to grow many varieties of flowers, all around the front and back of the property. She also planted auxiliary vegetables on the perimeter of the 120 tomatoes plants and around the 100 pepper plants. Corn, basil, garlic, onion, zucchini, cabbage, potatoes, lettuce, celery and the crowning glory overlooking this salad was a ten foot fig tree that produced the sweetest fruit imaginable.

How does your garden grow? Lots of digging, time, love and the ever present manure. Some of the plants were planted in late April as the winter took leave, but the tomato and pepper plants had to wait for the Memorial Day holiday. The planting day started early, a cord was drawn taut and with the precision of a surveyor, cross strings were pulled tight. A grid of two and one-half feet squares were made. At each intersect of the cords, a hole was dug but before the plant was put in, a half bucket of manure was poured in.

Now the manure was a whole different process. Before I was driving, my Dad would have others bring him sacks of horse manure. The horse waste is fairly dry, especially in the late winter and was no problem in the late spring. We would place the manure in a fifty gallon can and add water and make a slurry. This in turn became manageable to dip a bucket in and pour into the previous dug holes. When I got older and was driving, my Dad and I would go to a chicken farm in Russellton to dig out the coops and place the precious chicken product in bushels. Now chicken manure is a little softer and more liquidly than horse. I had to drive very carefully to get home before it decorated the inside of my car keeping all the windows open whether hot or cold outside. The slurry that my Dad made was treated like liquid gold. For at least two weeks our yard was like a filtration plant because of the odor.

An interesting situation would arise at this time of year that involved the Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph newspaper delivery boy. Our house was set strategically between Second and Third Streets, making it easy for the delivery boy to pass through our yard to get to his Third Street deliveries. The odor was so intense from late May to early June, the delivery boy would take his papers out and put the bag over his head running as fast as he could though the yard, it was a sight to see. This smelly season lasted about two weeks.

June was the month of flowers and our yard was noted for the fantastic array of flowers. It was a showcase and amateur photographers were always taking pictures, making my mother very proud. My dad now is anxiously awaiting for the first tomato to mature. There was always a friendly contest between the local gardeners. My dad won sometimes, but not all the time. One year I decided to pull a nasty joke on my dad, nasty to some, but I loved it. I went to the local 5 & 10 cent store and bought about six red rubber balls. Guess what happened next? Late one

night I went out to the garden and attached the tomatoes that were really rubber balls, to the plants that were distant from the walk. The walk was in the middle of the garden, one side all tomatoes and the other side peppers, mostly hot cherry peppers. The next day at an opportunistic time, I encouraged my dad to walk with me down to the garden. When we reached the point where the fake tomatoes were partially visible, I set off the tomato alarm, "Look, I see some red tomatoes on the back side!" Of course, this was impossible, it was only the middle of June, the first week of July was the real coming out days. My dad got as excited as I faked the faux response. Dad ran in and as he got near, the obvious came to pass. At that point, I had two rubber balls thrown at me. He would not admit that he was fooled in the beginning and did not remain angry very long. He went along with my joke.

A month passed and the May promise that the chicken manure had given us became reality in the month of July. The little "pomodoro's" which means, apples of gold, reached out from the green foliage beckoning us to pick them.

This is where the fickle tomatoes changed allegiance, now it's my mother's turn. As the hot July sun kissed the plants, my mother would make her early daily walk through the tomato garden picking the ripest tomatoes and placing them on a table on the back porch. When there was a suitable amount for canning, the fruit was cooked and placed in sterilized glass mason jars. She would do this sometimes twice a week for the next six to eight weeks canning over 100 jars each year. This kept our sauce supply for the winter months and then we would start again. Along with the other vegetables, her flowers and flower garden also flourished during the hot months. The last to be picked was the garlic, it could withstand the cold. The long tops of the garlic plants were strong and braided together to store in the basement giving us sweet tasting garlic all winter long.

As fall approached, some frost came with the season. All the vegetables were picked except for the cabbage. My brother Ralph and I had a great time kicking the leftover vegetable. They did get rotten with the cold and once they were broken open, the smell was nauseating. I can say that these cabbage incidents caused me to remain distant from sauerkraut for many years. After forty years of avoidance, now I can say I enjoy the taste.

Tomatoes in July, garlic in September and another growing season is history.

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