

These weekly essays may seem to be the products of a person obsessed with food and gardens, and in a way, I guess I am. This time of year, when every day is filled with harvesting, it becomes one of those pleasant necessities.

A few years ago a neighbor stopped in with a friend of his while we were working in the garden. The stranger asked, “Do you raise a garden for selling, or is it a hobby?”

I don’t make a habit of “holding my tongue,” so I answered him directly and truthfully. “We raise a garden because we feed ourselves as much as we can. It is part of our work—neither a hobby nor a money-making project. We could never afford to eat the way we think we should if we had to buy all of our food. And, the same thing applies to the cows we milk for home use. It would be easier to buy dairy foods from a store, but we go to the barn twice a day to milk, feeling more secure and safe with our own food supply. And we think we also have more delicious meals.”

Going into our garden now is not an esthetic experience for someone unfamiliar with various garden plants. Beds of the larger plants have flourished, leaving little space to walk between them. And there are weeds everywhere. The copious rains of the past couple of weeks—sorely needed, though we certainly weren’t in a drought condition—have not only perked up the garden crops. Those plants we humans designate as “weeds” have also come to life, racing to grow, flower, and fruit in record time before the first frost, a happening that can come rather early in our location.

So, food and gardens dominate our thinking, actions, and plans. And when we sit down at the table for a meal, more often than not the main nutrients on our plates have come from plants and animals we raised ourselves.

I like flowers, too, as much as most people, but I don’t have much time to spend on their care. Our former flower beds around the cabin have been changed to beds of interesting fieldstones, not an unpleasant change. And, in the garden are sunflowers and a row of mixed old-fashioned flowers, creating some spots of color in the green expanse. But, they are never our focus.

Our next garden job, one that will begin to change the looks of the area, will be digging the early potatoes. The vines are turning yellow and dying in some of the beds that we planted in early May. Those potatoes are ripe now and ready to be taken up and put into storage.

Taking up potatoes is one of my favorite jobs. It is like a treasure hunt, digging in the soft, dark, fertile soil and coming up with large, healthy tubers—white, yellow, or red, depending on the variety.

For purely nutritional needs, it would be more efficient to plant just one kind of potato, but that would take away the fun, and we do choose potatoes by how we plan to use them. Russets are great baking spuds, fingerlings are delicious cooked whole, Onaways and Satinas are the varieties I go for when I am going to peel and boil potatoes for a meal. And Strawberry Paws have the best name!

Still, it is the pleasure of discovery and the bit of scientific curiosity that leads us to plant so many different kinds, not only of potatoes, but of other

vegetables as well.

We will never write a paper for a botanical journal about what we plant in our garden, but we do notice the differences in the crops we raise. Dry beans are valuable for winter meals, and one kind would be sufficient, but that would rob us of the pleasure of opening that first ripe bean and discovering the dark red of a kidney bean, the black of a Coco, the red and white speckles of King of the Early, or the incomparable beauty of the warm tan and red Tigers Eye.

So, vegetable gardening, as necessary and important as it is for our lives, has other qualities as well. It is always a surprise, almost a shock, to see the rough and tumble appearance of the late August garden resolve itself into many very small, lovely parts. Amidst the huge leaves of the Hubbard squash plants, now turning slightly yellow as summer wanes, the large, warty, pale green squashes are now visible. And the foliage of our favorite squash, the buttercup, is beginning to thin out as well, revealing the dark green fruits with the cups of pale green-gray adorning the sides opposite the stalks.

So, we go forth this month, looking, harvesting, marveling, cooking, and eating. The pleasures of our vegetable garden never cease. Even the Japanese beetles, the Colorado potato beetles, and the tomato hornworm cannot ruin the picture. And the electrified sheep netting around the sweet corn and flour corn keeps at a safe distance that most persistent mama raccoon and her kids.