



In the Beginning, There Was a Garden

By Charlotte Johnstone

When Forbearance Church asked Marge Paley to transform the half-acre vacant lot on the east side of the church into what the Buildings and Grounds Committee wanted to call “Fellowship Garden,” the vision was for a serene and grassy expanse with beautiful flower beds, benches and maybe even a fountain—a place for contemplation, strolling and visiting after services. Marge was, they reasoned, the perfect choice—she ran a small farm outside of town, she knew about soil conditions, she knew how to manage people, and everyone thought she had the greenest thumb in town. And they were right about that—she was all those things.

But she was also a woman who equated beauty with usefulness.

She was a farmer, after all, and her life moved to the timeless rhythm of planting and harvesting, along with caring for a modest number of milk cows—her “girls,” as she called them. As far as Marge was concerned, grassy expanses were a waste of space, fallow fields begging for a purpose in life. Lawns needed tillers, not mowers, she thought, and what some people called “gardens,” she called “crops.”

So when it came about that Marge’s small band of fellow church members gathered as volunteers for the Fellowship Garden project, it quickly became apparent that while the

group thought they would create something like a stunning rose garden, Marge envisioned one-half acre of produce—corn, tomatoes, beans, peas, lettuce. “Let’s put this space to practical use,” is what she told them. “At a time when the food pantries around town are hard pressed to keep up with the demand, it makes simple sense to use this space for growing food.”

Marge’s volunteers, all of whom came armed with the latest flower seed catalogues, were dismayed. They numbered among them several men whose preoccupation with their lawns bordered on the religious, two women who were fierce competitors in the local Garden Club’s dahlia sweepstakes, an African Violet fancier, a dedicated container gardener and a few others whose intimacy with the earth consisted of approving landscapers’ blueprints. They didn’t look like they wanted to sweat, and there wasn’t a callus among them.

“Food?” they asked. “We’re supposed to grow food? But what about flowers? What about the beautiful rose beds?”

And what they got in reply was vintage Marge—to the point and filled with gritty humor:

“If you want flowers along with the vegetables, I would suggest we do what I do at the farm; namely, eliminate all thoughts of anything that requires more than a one-step procedure. This means that you can skip right over your catalogues’ sections on

roses. Roses are the garden's Intensive Care Unit, and they will bring you to your knees while you spray, pluck, prune and maybe stay up all night fighting off little tiny rose bugs who are laughing at you with little tiny bug voices. As far as I'm concerned, roses are only for people who have earned their PhD in nit-picking. I've been on a few blind dates with rose seedlings, but the flowering studs I got were apparently used to dating younger women, or at least women with better gardening clothes, because they turned surly, wilted with disappointment and refused to perform. I've been down that garden path before with promises of 'easy bedding' and special sprays and I've learned that for a good time I need to consort with hard workers—muscle plants who can punch their way through any kind of dirt, who don't give a rap about nitrogen balance, and whose motto is 'Use me, abuse me and I'll be back.' I propose that any flowers grown on our half-acre be of the lunch-bucket variety—hard workers who can take care of themselves."

"Like what?" someone in the group asked.

"Like day lilies," Marge replied. "Day lilies will grow anywhere and they have their own dating service, eventually merging and moving in with all their relatives. All you have to do is trowel up some holes and throw a bunch of them in that general direction—they know what they're doing and they'll take it from there. Or ferns. Ferns don't care where they are or who you are. They're the Energizer Bunnies™ of the garden and will appear year after year without an engraved invitation. Or plant morning glories, another reliable friend with assertiveness training. Put some of those babies on trellises along the sanctuary wall and they'll like it so much you may find them arriving through the windows for some hymn singing."

"Or how about hostas? The only thing they want to do is get fat and let their belts out a notch or two. Or begonias, the straight shooters of the garden, who will be there in sickness and in health, in good soil or bad, until deep frost doth us part. Look, it's not that I don't appreciate the more exotic flowers, but I think the real business of our bit of land here ought to be the produce we can provide for others. After all, Forbearance is always talking about community outreach and here we have a chance to be stewards of our soil and share its bounty with those who need it most."

"But, Marge," one of the group asked, "what about the congregation's needs? What about fellowship and contemplation? What about strolling and visiting after services? How can anyone stroll in a corn field?"

"Well," Marge replied, "what about contemplating the relationship between what someone grows in the soil and what you buy in the supermarket? What about contemplating that, in the beginning, the world was a garden? What about contemplating

that the earth is the only place we know in the entire universe with living organisms—that this green globe of ours is a gift from God for us to preserve, cultivate and share in its diversity? And what is better fellowship than weeding a garden side-by-side under the hot sun, swigging from a water bottle, and telling each other about our lives while watching a miracle happen? And as for strolling, what makes a better visit than to take someone to 'your' plants to check on their progress?"

And so that's what they did. And through the spring and early summer, Marge's voice could be heard over the half-acre as she made farmers of them all: Leave those gardening gloves at home! Feel the soil! Run that tiller deeper! Move those rocks! Straighten up those lines!

And when it came time for planting, Marge's exhortations to her steadily expanding group of workers began to seem like mantras for life itself: Trust the seeds you sow! Bless the rain even if you get soaked! Appreciate your aching muscles and the sweat on your face—that means you're alive! Don't be too quick to sneer at weeds you never met before—they may have some virtues that aren't yet apparent! Have patience with what you plant and trust in what you don't yet see! If something you planted doesn't come up, don't stand around grieving your losses—move on, 'cuz there's other work to do! A strong back and cheerful expectations are your best tools!

Well, it wasn't long before the church school children began to create bird feeders, the men's group made some benches, the fountain idea was abandoned for soaker hoses, someone donated a small shed for garden tools and all the pairs of muddy boots, and those at Forbearance who no longer could labor sat on the benches and encouraged those who could.

And the sun shone and the rains came and the corn tasseled and the morning glories climbed and all the other living things grew and the church members hoed and talked and staked and laughed and dug and mopped their faces and occasionally rested on the warm earth and contemplated the sky. Then they reaped what they had sown and gathered what they had reaped and took it to where it was most needed. And they continue to do so now from a garden of only a half-acre—a small green patch on a wondrous spinning orb—a place of creative miracles, both small and large, to share with their fellow creatures.

And they saw, as Marge knew they would, as it had been said at the beginning of creation, that it was good.

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