

HEATHER VOGEL FREDERICK

How Does This Garden Grow?

by Heather Vogel Frederick

My dreams of gardening glory were flattened by a soccer ball. That I even garden at all is, in fact, supremely ironic. For decades, my brown thumb was the source of much amusement among family and friends, and I still cringe when I recall the look on the face of a college acquaintance who foolishly entrusted me with her plant collection one summer – 27 thriving specimens – only to discover upon her return to campus in the fall that despite the best of intentions, I had managed to assassinate all but three. The trio limped on under her tender ministrations, but never managed to regain their former vigor, and it was with relief that I watched her graduate the following June. I don't think I could have endured another semester of her withering scorn. But back to the soccer ball.

The incident occurred the summer after we purchased our home, a fixer-upper with little to recommend it except that it sits on half an acre in a quiet neighborhood. Something about owning my own bit of land sparked a hitherto dormant urge to tuck seeds and plants into the earth and produce color, texture, and flavor. When I fall, I fall hard, and once bitten by the gardening bug I flung myself into this new pursuit. I spent the winter engulfed in research, wading through tomes on soil amendment, seed propagation, and garden design. I lectured my husband on what I was learning (preaching to the choir, as he's a far dabbler hand at gardening than I'll ever be), and learned to lower my voice to suitably reverent tones whenever mentioning British horticultural doyenne Gertrude Jekyll and her peers. With visions of Sissinghurst dancing in my head, I designed sweeping perennial borders on paper and pored over glossy catalogs – the sort that lure the unsuspecting into squandering foolish amounts of money on the wicked hussies of the plant world, most of which were destined to keel over and expire on contact with the heavy clay soil for which our region is famous. Those that weren't eaten by our legendary slugs, that is. But that's another story. As yet I was ignorant of these trials, and I couldn't wait for spring. It came; we dug; we planted. The Willamette Valley in Oregon, where we live, can bolster the confidence of even the most inveterate brown thumb (temperate and fertile, it was dubbed "Eden's Gate" by those hardy pioneers arriving at the end of the Oregon Trail). But still I was surprised when small green shoots appeared, thrived, and quickly grew into flowers, herbs, and vegetables that actually resembled the pictures on their seed packets. Weeks later, however, the first drifts of larkspur, columbine, poppies, and choice perennials were trampled by a herd of small boys in hot pursuit of a soccer ball. An overpriced shrub was mistaken for an alien and lost all of its leaves and most of its branches in a duel. And the climbing rose I was coaxing upward into the arms of a small maple tree was crushed when someone who wasn't supposed to be climbing the tree in the first place jumped down and landed on it. My visions of horticultural grandeur were brought up short. Clearly, it was time to regroup.

Little boys need room to play. Parents deserve pleasant outdoor surroundings. A compromise was in order. So we divided the spoils. For now, the backyard belongs to our boys, and any plants that stray into this zone have to pass the “squash test” — i.e., will Mom cry if it gets squashed? The front yard, meanwhile, is ours. My husband and I dug up the entire dreary stretch of lawn, banishing faceless, squatty shrubs and ho-hum ground cover. We replaced them with a pathway made of stone we quarried ourselves and lined it with perennial beds bursting with roses and lavender, hardy geraniums, phlox, day lilies, and the like. Now, not only can we enjoy the view from our living-room window, but our neighbors can enjoy it, too. The seasons have turned several times now, the garden has grown, and so have our boys. While it’s not time to make inroads on their backyard kingdom yet — they’re still far too rough-and-tumble for that — they’re gradually developing an appreciation of sorts for things horticultural. At times I despair of ever civilizing them completely. Recently, for instance, my older son inhaled some lily-of-the-valley, that incomparable harbinger of spring, and informed me that it smelled like “really, really good bathroom spray.” But my husband and I continue craftily devising bait for luring them into this rewarding pastime. A wee bonsai tree purchased at a local flower show proved irresistible to my elder son and has become his pride and joy. Last season, my younger son chose six cabbages and a tomato plant for his section of the vegetable garden (never mind that he doesn’t like cabbage). Through it all, I’m learning patience, not such a bad thing for a gardener. Especially one who’s growing both plants and children.