

JUNE'S GARDEN

What do butter, puppets, earrings, slippers, perfume bottles, skates, baseball bats, lady-in-the-tub, ballerinas, or even a ginger ale bottle and music have to do with flowers and gardens? Grandparents know.

In my grandparents' garden, bleeding hearts, fuchsias, hollyhocks and bluebells grew, along with a black walnut, Gravenstein apple, and Bing cherry trees. Behind the house there was a grape arbor that supported plants of blue and white grapes called Concord. My grandfather was proudest, however, of his raspberry patch and vegetable garden.

The gravel road leading to their house was bordered by ditches of swampy water. In the swampy water lived frogs, insects we called "skippers", and dragon flies. Alongside the ditches were various grasses, dandelions and other weeds, Chicory, wild roses and willow trees, where snakes, butterflies, many different kinds of birds such as red-winged blackbirds and meadowlarks made their homes.

There were fields of corn planted by a neighboring farmer where you heard and caught glimpses of quail and China pheasant.

For my cousins and me, the garden, the road, the swampy ditches and the bordering field provided a world of discovery, adventure and collecting. A red and black feather from a red-winged blackbird was my discovered prize. My cousins' prizes were yellow and green Jasper rock they found on the gravel road and a long, iridescent skin a snake had shed. They claimed it came from a two-foot long snake that lived in the willows by the road. After that I was very careful to stay far away from the willows.

My grandmother showed me how to use flowers for doll clothes. Snapdragons for slippers, bluebells for hats, and hollyhock blossoms for skirts. A bleeding heart was "lady in the tub." Gently pull apart the two heart-shaped petals; the stamen pops up; this is the lady in the tub.

My cousins and I would take snapdragons and put on a puppet show much like Punch and Judy. We would act out plays about dragons and such by squeezing the sides of the flower, which almost appears to be talking. Pretending we were Indians, we'd stalk quail and pheasant, but never caught any. We also tried to catch butterflies, but frogs were easier. Sometimes we would bring the frogs up to the house and make pens to keep them as pets, but the next day they would have disappeared. We later realized our grandparents had probably released them and taken them back to the swamp.

Our grandfather loved music. He sang in a quartet. My aunt played the piano accompanying the quartet and they practiced at my grandparents' home. He made whistles for my cousins and me out of willow reeds and showed us how to tightly hold wide blades of grass between our thumbs; blowing hard on the edge of the blade made a vibrating sound. At times we were allowed to join in with the quartet. Our favorite tunes were "Home on the Range," "Oh, Susannah," "Sweet Adeline" and "Yankee Doodle."

My cousins and I also learned which wild plants were edible and which ones to avoid. Dandelion greens and a plant they called "woolen britches" were collected to eat. We collected blackcaps (wild raspberries) and the small blackberries that grew along the ground and over stumps of newly logged areas. The berries were made into jam and syrup, and our reward was a breakfast of Grandfather's shamrock-shaped pancakes with berry syrup.

I was reminded of these childhood memories when I read the October issue of Yankee Magazine. Readers had sent letters reminiscing about their grandparents showing them how to make different images using various parts of a bleeding heart flower. This was described as: "Carefully take the two sides of the heart-shaped petals and place them on a flat surface; these become two rabbits; the next two pieces earrings, the next a pair of slippers and last of all, the stamen a perfume bottle." Other versions were: "Two rabbits, two skates, and a baseball bat; or two pink rabbits, two slippers and a bottle of ginger ale."

This summer I was shown how to make a ballerina out of a fluffy fuchsia flower. Break off the stem and insert it between the bulbous end and the ruffled part of the flower. One can imagine a ballerina with fluffy petticoats of red and blue.

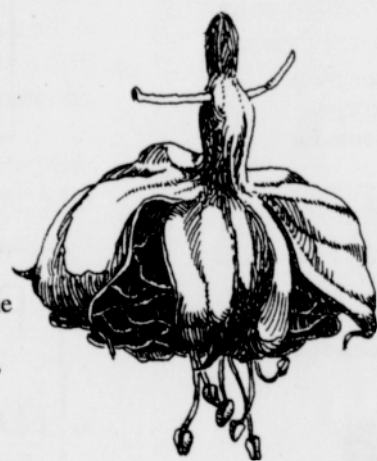
Another trick, though not from any garden around here, is to shell a peanut and carefully crack it open along its seam. Inside you'll find a tiny fork-bearded man.

And who can refrain from twirling the yellow blossom of a dandelion or buttercup under another's chin and when the chin takes on a yellowish tinge exclaiming, "You sure like butter!"

My grandmother was raised on a homestead ranch in Northeastern California. Many Piate and Klamath Indians lived nearby. She would tell me about how she and her childhood Indian friends collected pitch off pine trees to be used as chewing gum. They also showed her how to dig roots of various plants that were edible or could be used for

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medicinal purposes. She was very knowledgeable of all plant life and inspired me to become an avid gardener.

Much of that Indian knowledge has been forgotten about over the years, but people interested in it can still find some sources. There is a book called "Wild Flowers of the Pacific Coast," by Leslie L. Haskins, first published in the 1950s. This book identifies many wild plants growing in our area. Each plant that is identified also has added text about how the Indian tribes used it and gives some history of the legends behind the names the Indians use for many of these plants.

Technical advanced knowledge children now learn from media, books, schooling, computers and other means is of course important and essential, but it doesn't take the place of a "hands on" experience of digging in the earth, planting a single seed, and nurturing it to a full grown plant. This also teaches responsibility (caring for the plant), patience (waiting for the seed to mature), rewards of harvest and sharing the harvest with others.

Buchart Gardens in Victoria, B.C. are beautiful in any season, but in the fall even more so because of the autumn colors of the trees. This year a friend and I were there in late September, and the flowers were still blooming. Paths were lined with heliotrope, fibrous begonias, cosmos, chrysanthemums, large beds of all color pentstemon and dahlias.

Mrs. Buchart envisioned building this garden from a rock quarry, and it is a masterpiece of creativity. The garden was started in 1904. The first plants were given to her as a present: sweet pea seeds and a rose bush. Little did she realize her interests would develop into planting a series of individual gardens that grew to include acres with fountains and paths that are now visited by thousands of people from all over the world each year. What a legacy she left for so many to enjoy and be inspired by the beauty.

Question: Who cultivated your interest in gardening? Please send your stories to:

June's Garden, P.O. Box 74,
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Donation \$25 (to defray legal expenses of ad hoc coalition.)

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