

AN IRISH GARDEN

Heather Knowles

Like William Wordsworth, I was a child of nature. I grew up on a three thousand acre ranch in Western Nevada and North Eastern California, a very different landscape from his Lake District: his rolling green hills versus my craggy snow-covered mountains, his verdant green grass versus my fragrant sagebrush, and his misty mild days versus my nose-tickling cold mornings and eyeball-burning afternoons.

My three brothers and I were encouraged to be outside all day whenever possible. My mother's favorite saying was "don't come back unless there's blood and lots of it." Even as a child I loved the land and the connection to something larger than myself. I spent my days in the giant sagebrush that I imagined to be a castle, surrounded by a huge moat I dug in the desert hardpan. Its pungent arms provided shade from the heat, and as I lay for hours watching puffy white clouds move languorously through the still blue sky, I knew there was Someone who had created all this just for me.

My life was tied to the land and the rhythms of nature. The spring was the time of birth and planting; the summer was the time of careful watering and haying (cutting and preparing the wild hay for the cows to eat in the winter); the fall was the time of harvest and preparation, and the winter was a time for catching up on all the things left undone in the frenzy of the other three seasons.

After I was married, I found myself living in urban areas far from the places of my youth. In the attempt to not lose my soul in the city, I looked for ways to get back to nature, and gardening became one of those ways. In the spring —no matter where I live —I begin to feel a clock ticking inside me..."it's time to till, it's time to plant," it says. With my hands in the dirt, tending tiny plants, then larger ones, and finally harvesting the fruits of my labor, I am at peace. At these times, I have had many long conversations

with God. With the sun warm on my back, bees buzzing in the squash flowers, a hoe in my hands, and the smell of overturned soil in the air, the sounds of life fall away, and I melt into a trance. Time passes unnoticed. Did you know that by kneeling between rows of corn you can disappear? Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, I become only an eye, seeing all, immersed in creation.

My husband and I have done a lot of moving around for his job, and so I have gardened in North Eastern California, Wichita (Kansas), San Luis Obispo, Santa Maria, and finally, in the Rockies in Montana. Each place has been unique and interesting, but Butte, Montana was by far the most comical and challenging place I have ever raised a garden. We bought a house that needed a lot of interior work; fortunately, in Butte, winter and early spring are great seasons to complete indoor projects. But as May approached, the weather finally took a turn for the better. Since the inside of the house was complete, my thoughts turned to the garden. Time was ticking on that internal clock.

The first order of business was to get a spot cleared and tilled. Everyone I spoke to told horror stories about trying to raise a garden in Butte. Late frost, early frost, summer snow storms; all conspired to frustrate the dedicated gardener. I was undeterred. I'd never met the place where I couldn't raise a garden. I could at least plant potatoes and onions, since they would be buried deep in the ground. I was ready to test my fortitude in Butte!

For my garden spot, I decided on the space where we had torn down an old shed. The floor had originally been gravel, but time and the storing of hay for the former owners' horses had turned it into a kind of mulch mixed with some rock. I knew that with a good rotor-tilling it would be okay for my first year. I rolled out "Big Red," my rotor-tiller. Its handles reach almost to my shoulders when it's sitting upright, and a giant engine drives the tines that chop, shred, and regurgitate even the toughest soil. After some fiddling, I fired "Big Red" up, and with a roar she came to life. Later, my neighbors laughingly shared their thoughts on whether I was running the tiller or the tiller running me. Make no mistake, I was in complete control of "Big Red", and together we prepared the bed for my potatoes and onions.

I planted the next day and waited....and waited...and waited. With temperatures fluctuating between the fifties during the day and the teens and twenties at night, the plants wisely kept their heads underground. I raked the leftover moldy hay and straw into a huge pile and used it to cover the potato hills to try and warm them up a little. I also busily prepared two other sections of the garden and optimistically planted beans, peas, carrots, lettuce, corn, squash, cucumbers and even some broccoli. What the heck—you never know!

A friend had also given me six tomato starts (young plants) that I was keeping indoors and planned to plant outside after "hardening" them off a little. This practice involves slowly adjusting plants sprouted and raised indoors to the cooler temperatures outside. I

would put the tomato starts on my deck mid-morning, leave them out all day, and then bring them in at night. Eventually, once they were larger and more hardy, they would be planted in the ground. One morning in May, while my mother-in-law was visiting, she looked outside and commented, “Heathyr, should the tomato plants look like that?” I had failed to check the temperature before I set them out and they had hardened alright—right into frozen sticks. As the sun hit them they thawed and melted into mush. I was apologetic when I confessed to my friend I had murdered her lovingly nurtured starts.

Despite that setback, by the beginning of June I was bursting with pride at all my little plants coming up in the garden. Silently I congratulated myself and smugly wondered what everyone had been fussing about. It wasn’t that hard to raise a garden here! Then a cold snap killed everything except the lettuce, potatoes, and onions. I shrugged it off and confidently replanted, spreading straw over everything for insulation. Mid-June found me once again gloating over my sproutlings and becoming a religious listener to a weather station.

For those of you who have lived in sunny California all your lives and don’t worry about the weather, I should explain. A weather radio is a special radio that plays the forecast and all the weather alerts of the National Weather Service. It is extremely important to have one when you live in tornado alley in the Great Plains, and it can also alert any diligent gardener to oncoming cold weather. So once again, although I knew that a freeze was coming, I had to watch helplessly as it killed everything except some peas, the lettuce, potatoes and onions. (I didn’t have enough sheets to cover the whole garden.) Grimly, I planted a third time, determined not to be done in.

By the fourth of July, all the old-timers told me the frost would be over, and I breathed a sigh of relief as the garden took off. With warmer days and nights it grew very well all throughout July. We feasted on fresh lettuce, peas, and some squash. But towards the end of July, whenever I walked through the garden I heard a strange whirring sound. Then literally hundreds of grasshoppers would rise up. We’d had a wet, warm (okay, warm for Butte) spring and the weather was unusually dry through July. All conditions were right for a huge hatching. Through the month of August, I watched in horror as they chomped on my precious beans, squash and eventually the rest of the lettuce and my fledgling broccoli. I did not get one single string bean because as fast as the plants produced the tiny vegetable from the flowers, the waiting grasshoppers fed on the sweet, tender bean. I did get a few zucchini and one cucumber.

Toward the end of August and beginning of September, I hoped that the coming frost might kill off the grasshoppers, and I would be able to salvage a bean or two. I lived and died by my weather radio and various old sheets I scrounged up to cover what was left of my squash, peas, and beans. Just that light covering would protect them from the freeze. Unfortunately, it also protected the grasshoppers who just hunkered down under

the leaves of the plants as I laid down the sheets. So much for that idea!. One bright spot was my corn. It began to tassel and ear and I was hugely optimistic that the “sixty day” ripening advertised on the seed bag was true. Labor Day weekend found me every day squeezing and gloating over my little ears of corn. Two days later all the corn was dead when the temperature dropped to around ten degrees. I’d had enough!

I pulled up my dead hopes and left them out to rot, feeding the soil for the next year. I dug up all the potatoes and onions. Amazingly it was a very good crop of both. Later, after I could joke about it, I laughed and said Butte was good for an “Irish” garden; you could grow lots of potatoes and onions. Because I *am* Irish I can joke like that. Soon after the harvest, snow started to fly and my thoughts turned optimistically to the next season of planting and harvesting. Seed catalogs were pored over, lessons noted. I thought: next year I might get some chickens for those grasshoppers...

I’ve always said that what I love the most about gardening is the fortitude and faith it takes each year. So much effort and work is put into preparing a place for the tiny seeds that magically contain all they need inside to create new life. Then you toil with patience and love, caring for the struggling seedlings as you battle the weeds, the weather, and the bugs. At the end you may get to put some food on your table...or you may not, but it was the journey, the battle, the triumphs and the losses making it worthwhile. That is not landscaping your yard; that is landscaping your soul. Nature can be the beautiful place of contemplation and connection with God that Wordsworth and Emerson write about, but it is also a place of wildness, of kill or be killed, of survival. And so I will stay in the fight and meditate on the miracle of life and death as God shapes my soul in the garden. Maybe I will see you there... ☺