

With the can of worms, a jug of water, and the bag of sandwiches we wandered down to the river bank. Amah Lou chose a likely spot for fishing. As the girls began to thread the worms onto those open safety pins, I picked up the camera to snap pictures, because I couldn't make myself touch those slimy, wiggling critters. Swarms of minnows were swimming in the creek. Alice and Amah Lou tried to shoo them toward the baited lines without success; the fish just nudged, not nibbled, those juicy worms.

Before long we gave up to munch on the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches I'd made.

GARDEN GLIMPSES

Using the horse drawn walking plow, Dad and our gray mare, Daisy, plowed our half-acre garden to make it ready for us to plant row after row of vegetables. String was tied taut between two stout sticks to mark a row. Using a hoe we scratched a shallow trench beneath the string. Then we were ready to plant the dry seeds.

Mom decided which veggie should be planted in each row, and gave us the seeds to plant. Margaret planted tiny lettuce seeds because she was the oldest. I planted radishes and Alice was given peas to plant. She told Mom she didn't like to eat peas, and shouldn't have to plant them, so we traded. John was youngest, so he was given beans to plant.

Each year we liked to try a new vegetable. One year Mom chose okra. It grew into a healthy plant and we picked the pods for Mom to cook. She had never cooked okra before, so steamed the pods like other veggies. Eager to try a new treat, we dished up the slimy food, and quickly turned our noses up at the first taste! We had a big laugh the next year when okra sprouted and grew on its own, but we didn't harvest it. Now we laugh because that was the only food that Mom couldn't make edible.

We liked having Mom garden with us. As we worked we talked about the treats to come: sliced crisp radishes spread on thick slices of homemade bread and butter; Mom's special dressing of hot vinegar and bacon drippings on wilted lettuce; the first ears of golden sweet corn bathed in butter; the vegetable soups that warmed us and said we were home, whether from grade school or college.

We reserved one corner of the garden for planting flowers. We kids helped decide what to plant. Margaret chose four-o'clocks. During the summer she went out about 4:00 every day to see if they were blooming, and they were.

Alice chose sweet peas to climb the garden fence and bloom. They made lovely bouquets. John chose to plant Johnny-jump-ups, of course. I chose frilly cosmos because I thought they looked so friendly. Grandma and Mom wanted zinnias and marigolds. That flower garden became a riot of color with the pinks, purples, yellows, oranges and reds, giving us lovely bouquets for the house and gifts for friends.

Throughout the spring and summer, weeding the garden was a trying chore that we soon tired of doing, yet it had to be done. Mom taught us the names of a few weeds that we thought were strange, such as five-lobed cinquefoil, chickweed, sheep sorrel, and chamomile; it was fun using their name as we tossed them on the compost pile. Finding bugs on our veggies and tossing them into a bucket to drown made our skin crawl, especially those large tomato worms! They were ugly and looked almost ferocious. We liked the ladybugs and didn't toss them out.

We did this chore as quickly as possible. Then we gathered some early radishes, a few scallions, and fistfuls of crisp, green lettuce for the next meal's salad.

In early spring I remember Dad's big smile as he brought in the first picking of rhubarb, which the old-timers called pie plant. We would have rhubarb sauce or pie for supper. We liked picking those large rhubarb leaves and breaking off the thick rosy colored stems for Mom to make into tasty desserts. When we were told that the green leaves contained poisonous oxalates, we were very careful to throw the leaves onto the compost pile. We couldn't understand how a plant could be both good to eat and also poisonous.

The ground under the fruit trees became magically carpeted with soft pink petals. Tiny new apples, pears and plums formed that told us to check the quarter-acre strawberry patch in a corner of the orchard. Strawberries were the first fruits to ripen.

Margaret, Alice, John, and I, each with a pail in hand, raced to the patch for the first taste of summer! Soon strawberry juice stained our smiling faces as we searched among the green leaves for ripe fruit. Then we raced back to present our harvest, anticipating Mom's tender, flaky shortcakes.



Sisters Picking Strawberries

Throughout the season, the large strawberry patch kept us busy with tedious picking in the hot sun. We searched each row to fill our baskets before the sun got too hot for comfort. To avoid aching backs we took along our one-legged milking stools for squatting among the vines, where it was much easier to see the berries hidden under the leaves. Their sweet juiciness added to the fun by filling our tummies as we filled the baskets.

One summer, we girls set up a stand by the highway, hoping to make a fortune. We wore our straw hats, made a large sign advertising: STRAWBERRIES: 10¢ A QUART, put a big umbrella over the berries, and waited for the customers to stop. The sun was hot and we were glad we had a jug of lemonade to drink.



Strawberries for Sale, 10 cents a quart!

Fun, not riches, was our reward. We still had a good time being “in business”—and our customers were glad to get such good, fresh strawberries.

Summer was the season when our cousins came for weeks of visiting. They helped make summer chores fun, especially picking strawberries. The air was filled with laughter and stories. Dick, Phyllis and Kenneth Drescher were eager pickers. Uncle Dewey’s kids—Kathleen, John C. and Sammy—also picked aplenty.

We all found the berries best to eat just off the vine. The younger cousins were cautioned to leave the green ones to ripen. They were often distracted by butterflies that led them on a merry chase. It was a delight to watch them. Another cousin, Maurice Adair, made us squeal as he flipped bugs toward us. Actually, we liked being teased by him.

One summer Maurice’s dad Fred had new bifocals and complained because the berries weren’t where they seemed to be. We didn’t understand why, but it didn’t stop him from picking his share.

We picked many baskets full that we made into shortcake, ice cream, and jams that delighted our taste buds. On hot summer days we preserved them. Soon rows of strawberry jam gleamed on the cellar shelf, waiting for hot biscuits and butter on a cold winter morning. It was well worth the effort of the warm summer work.

We froze many of the berries and took our surplus produce to Frozen Food Locker Plant, which rented lockers for storing food until we wanted it. We enjoyed them all year as our reward. This touch of summer in the cold winter months always brought smiles to our faces.

Green beans soon ripened and canning season began. Mom and Grandma sterilized the jars while we girls washed and snapped the beans. All was ready for Mom to blanch those beans, then ladle them into jars, cap them, and process them in a large kettle of boiling water.

Mom or Grandma handled the boiling water part of canning. The steamy air made us sweaty, yet it caused curls to form in Margaret’s hair. My hair and Alice’s just drooped down, to our disappointment. A break for fresh air was most welcome by this time and we girls were glad to be outdoors.

More sweltering days of summer were spent by the cast iron stove during the canning season. I particularly remember canning tomatoes. We placed a ripe juicy tomato into a pan of very hot water until the skin split. Then we lifted it out with a large slotted spoon, slipped the skin from the flesh, and dropped it into a canning jar. That was rather fun. We peeled one tomato after another until the jars were full and the basket empty. Next, Mom processed the tomatoes while we took a book and settled outdoors under the maple tree.

The cucumbers were tasty to pick in the garden for a crunchy snack. We brought in baskets of those cucumbers and watched Mom put dozens of them in a crock of salt water to soak for a couple of days; then she put them to soak in vinegar for a day or two more. Finally they were covered with sweetened vinegar and packed in sterilized jars. Oh, the wonder of juicy pickles after days in the brine!

I can still see the luscious deep purple grapes that grew on Grandpa and Grandma's side fence, and the jams and jellies that we made from them. Grandma hooked a muslin bag full of the grapes onto the warming shelf of the cook stove that was always hot, and let the juice drip into the waiting pot. This juice was boiled with added sugar until it became tasty jelly. Grandma then squeezed the bag of grapes to release a second batch of juice that became delicious jam.

One year, Alice suggested we make a grape pie that she'd read about. Pitting those purple grapes for the pie was a messy chore, yet we laughed as we flipped the seeds toward each other. We added sugar and tapioca to the pitted grapes, topped it with a flaky lattice crust, and then slid it into the hot oven. The family raved about the rich fruit flavor of this special pie, but we don't remember ever making another. Pitting those grapes was something we never wanted to do again.

Another culinary delight came from the row of cherry trees growing on the south side of our yard. One summer during Uncle Fred's family visit, cousins Maurice and Orin used step-ladders to reach and pick the cherries. They brought bucketfuls to us for pitting. Ruth and we three girls pitted them by hand, which was rather tedious, while Naomi used the cherry pitter that looked like a meat grinder. This was faster and the mashed cherries were fine for pies or jam but the hand-pitted ones were prettier on a cheesecake or in a fruit salad. We canned many jars of cherries, and made quite a few pies too.

Gooseberry pie was another favorite of ours, made from the berries we gathered from the southeast corner of our farm. The bushes bore sharp thorns on the stems so we wore long sleeves and gloves. Even so, we often pricked our fingers as we grasped a berry. Not a bit of fun. Dad placed a screen door on blocks. We used it to remove the stem and blossom ends from the berries by rolling them back and forth over the screen. We liked that job, especially when we thought of the pies and jams we'd make.

Gooseberry pie was much easier to make than grape pie because we had no seeds to remove. Its tart taste made a fine ending to a summer meal. The jams were made with ample sugar because eating a fresh gooseberry caused our mouths to pucker up. We kids thought it fun to watch the cousins eat their first gooseberry and see their surprise at the taste.

Grandpa liked to raid the potato patch and bring in small potatoes—his favorites. One rainy day he told us that the crop was spoiled, and we asked what had happened. With a laugh he answered that the rain caused them to grow big! He would miss his small potatoes. They were now mature and ready to be stored in the cool dark cellar.

Peaches, plums, apples and pears grew in abundance in the orchard north of the house. When the fruits were ripe, there were harvest chores of gathering and lugging those heavy baskets to the kitchen; then helping to turn them into delectable dishes. More cellar shelves were filled with canned fruits, jams, jellies, and butters.

During the summer, Grandma carefully chose the best canned goods to enter in the fall County Fair. We were so proud when we saw ribbons attached to her entries, knowing that we helped with the canning and preserving.

Oh the beauty of those colorful rows of fruits and vegetables. What heart-warming memories to feast upon! Is it my imagination that foods were tastier when we were growing up?



Still Gathering Pears; 1950