MY FATHER’S GARDEN AND MINE: BY JULIAN BURROUGHS

ANY times I have heard my father tell of our first experience at gardening together, I being too small at the time to remember anything about it: “I had gone down to the garden to weed out my cabbages,” he would say with a laugh, “and you had followed me; you were a little shaver then, just big enough to walk. Well, I had my row of cabbages neatly weeded out and when I straightened up to rest my back and I looked around and there you were, standing over the row with a young cabbage in your hand, the last one; you had pulled up every one. I asked you what you were doing and you said ‘weeds’—well, I have a mind to spank you for it yet.” This last he would always add with a threatening flourish.

Later I have come to realize that even at that time I had begun to express my disapproval of cabbages and hand weeding, a vegetable and a labor that should have little place in a well-managed garden. The proper use of the wheel hoe and the hoe will eliminate most of the laborious hand-weeding, and as for the cabbages one can usually buy them just as good and just as cheaply as one can raise them, thus leaving the ground and time for the more precious garden products that are both expensive and inferior in quality when bought. The very fact that my father was weeding cabbages by hand will tell those who are garden wise that he was not a really good gardener. And here at Riverby-on-the-Hudson he was not; at Woodchuck Lodge on the summit of the Catskills, where the hot, enervating days of July and August are cool and stimulating, he has become almost an ideal gardener. This very coolness of the days, which made it a pleasure to work in the garden, also made it possible to have the most delicious Telephone peas and head lettuce all summer; the peas especially were a joy to father; picked while the dew was on and at just the proper age, they were sweet and tender, being one of the treats of the summer. This same coolness kept the weeds in check as well; yes, and the garden was within ten feet of the house, right in sight constantly where it could beckon to father every hour; every weed that tried to grow had to do so in plain view of the easy chair on the porch—he simply could not help having a good garden!
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But here at Riverby in the Hudson Valley it was different; father fell into the common error, the pitfall of the average home gardener,—he made garden with joy in spring. When the grass became green and the robins came, until the orioles began to nest and the oaks were in full foliage, he had the gardening fever in earnest; he planted and hoed daily; his hoes, bright from use, hung in the pear tree at the end of the garden; packages of seeds were scattered over his study table or the seat in the summer-house. How he did enjoy it! The fragrant spring days, the apples and cherries in bloom, the birds he knew and loved so well keeping him company, all out of doors tender and inviting, the moist, brown earth of the garden freshly plowed and cultivated—it was all irresistible and father found in “making garden” the best pleasure of the season. The ground, too, was mellow and soft from the winter frost, the spring rains and the plow; it was a pleasure to hoe and dig in it; the entire garden was free from weeds; it was a clean slate on which anyone would have found pleasure in writing with rows of peas and corn. Soon, however, the weather got hot, weeds got a “start,” there was rust on the hoe where it hung in the pear tree, and by August the weeds had the upper hand and were going to seed; the ground was baked hard, the rows of corn were wilted and dusty, the beets small and tough, the peas could no longer grow in the hot weather. Only a Mexican peon under the eyes of his master could have hoed out these waist-high weeds in the hard ground, and they not only sucked up the scanty moisture from the vegetables but they sowed their seeds by the million, making the work of the next year doubly hard.

AND this is the fault of too many amateur gardeners: they spend too much time on the garden in spring and then neglect it too often the remainder of the season. The ideal plan is to work a little every day, or at least three or four times a week, from the time of the first planting in spring until the ground freezes in November. By doing this not a weed can go to seed, making the work easier every year. Weeds rob the soil of everything the vegetables need.

For those who have little time to work outdoors the best way is to plan their garden on paper, marking the kind and quantity of each vegetable, according to their needs, putting the entire garden in rows running north and south, leaving room between the rows for the passage of the wheel-hoe. Plan to put the short-growing vegetables between the tall, the late between the early, and plan to follow up one crop with another; as for instance the winter celery can be planted in the row of the early peas, the tomatoes can be set in the
row of early lettuce; the winter turnips can fill the row vacated by the 
early corn, and so on. It is a fascinating thing to do, to thus plan 
one’s summer campaign and it pays in the end.

After planning the garden thus, it is well to get the seeds for the 
season. Get them of one of the old and well-known seedsmen; not 
only are better seeds, as a rule, obtained thus, but these firms send 
out for the asking practical booklets and leaflets on all garden ques-
tions, giving nearly complete instructions for the growing of every-
thing. It is true the seedsmen in their leaflets do not give any of the 
discouraging features; they speak glowingly of the fine quality and 
number of home-grown Hubbard squash and say never a word about 
the squash vine-borer! Nor in their interesting and enthusiasm-
rousing talk on cauliflower do they mention the cabbage-root maggot! 
For all of that, their seeds and advice are better than that of the corner 
grocery. It is not only wise to get seeds for the season early, but the 
seedsmen of national reputation do not sell last year’s seeds or those 
not true to name—both my father and I have found that others do.

WHILE waiting for the ground to be ready to work out of 
doors, many things can be started in a box in a sunny 
window—or a storm sash can be taken from the house and a 
little cold frame made in which a surprising number of things can be 
started. Father would never do any of these little aids to nature 
that are such joy to most gardeners; his gardening fever exhausted 
itself in the natural out-of-doors planting season. With one storm 
sash, four old boards, some manure and a piece of canvas for a night 
cover, I was able to start lettuce, tomatoes, cauliflower, and even 
some corn and muskmelons, and gain a month on the season. Paper 
boxes, unsoldered tin cans, paper-lined fruit baskets, anything 
available can be used. For tomatoes I found empty breakfast-food 
boxes the best; these would hold together long enough to be set in 
season in the ground, simply setting box and all into the earth, 
where it would rot and let the roots spread out into the soil. Plants 
set in this way, provided they have been hardened off, as the garden-
ers say, by gradually accustoming them to the outdoor temperature, 
receive no check at all and lose no time in the transplanting. I have 
had tomatoes by July fourth, corn the last day in June, muskmelons 
by July tenth. Even lima beans, the hardest of all vegetables to 
start here in the north, can often be successfully launched in paper 
boxes two weeks in advance of the season.

Some of the roofing paper manufacturers have made paper flower 
pots; these are neat, light, do not break, and unhook for opening. 
These pots are cheap and when only used for spring planting will
last a long time—being round and tapering they take up more room than do the square paper boxes. A regular hotbed is considerable trouble and requires some practice for successful management, the damping off, a fungus that attacks the stems of many plants grown in a hotbed, is quite likely to play havoc with the vegetables in the hotbed of the inexperienced gardener. After running a hotbed for two seasons I gave it up and simply converted it into a cold frame where I raised a supply of radishes, young onions, beets and the like, two or three weeks in advance of the season. I found it did not pay for me to try to force the hand of Nature too much—hotbeds were for professionals and those who could devote much time to them.

The plans made, seeds bought, and perhaps some vegetables started under glass, the gardener waits eagerly for the day when the garden can be plowed and the real out-of-doors planting begun. The old rule is to test the ground for “fitness to plow” by taking a handful of the surface soil and squeezing it firmly; if it sticks together into a lump it is still too wet; the mold made in the hand should crumble and fall apart.

My own experience with one of the most difficult of gardens, a low, heavy, clay soil, to which had been added, to make matters worse, a quantity of subsoil or “hard pan” from a near-by cellar, may be of help. First I raked into heaps all the stones, shoveling them into a wheelbarrow and wheeling them away, then I added all the sifted coal ashes we had, also muck, and once a year manure and such other humus as I could get. In ten years I must have added ten inches of sifted coal ashes, the ground improving in texture all the time. Some soils are harmed by coal ashes, as sandy or very light soil, or muck land, for instance; other heavy soils are improved. The improvement in the heavy soil of my garden was unmistakable and apparent in every way. The muck from the swamp at Slab-sides I added whenever I could get it; it is really better than ashes for heavy ground; the supply however is limited and few people can get it at all. All the refuse from the garden that the cow and chickens would not eat I composted and added when it was fully rotted. From being one of the hardest of gardens to work, damp, sticky, from wet in spring to hard and hot in summer, my garden became so mellow that it could be worked as soon as the frost was out in March, and no matter how hot and dry the August soil never baked or hardened. Everything grew surprisingly well except onions. The delicious muskmelons and corn and other vegetables more than made up for the smallness of the onions. In a garden it often seems as though one vegetable tried to make up for the failures of others.
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For the intelligent working of the garden a knowledge of the relation of the condition of the soil to the growth of plants is useful. The soil is simply a mechanical medium to hold the nitrogen, potash, phosphoric acid and moisture in such form that they can be taken up by the fine feeder roots of the plants. These feeder roots of practically all the plants of the north require a soil that is cool, moist, and porous—they cannot flourish in a hot, baked soil. And the one paramount thing that makes a soil best adapted to plant growth is humus. Humus is simply vegetable matter so finely rotted that all the fermentation and sourness have leaked away, leaving it like meal, like the dark soil or leaf mold you find in the woods. This cool black earth of the woods, how moist and pungent it is! Matrix of orchids and ferns—if we all had enough of it to mix with our garden soil how our gardens would flourish! Next to it is the level black muck land, which when drained, sweetened and given potash muck makes the ideal garden. Unlike clay, sand will not become hard; it gets hot and dry, however, and as a rule needs humus.

After the garden soil has been made loose in texture, and is provided with humus the next thing is cultivation. For this the wheel hoe that has a breast attachment is best; here again we come to the original proposition; a wheel hoe is useless unless used frequently—several times a week. If this is done no weeds can grow big enough to be pulled or hoed with the hand hoe. And the ground cannot dry out half as quickly as if neglected, for the constant stirring of the surface forms what we call the dust mulch, a dusty layer over the top of the ground which prevents the escape of the moisture and the entrance of the heat. In fact were it not for the vegetables which are constantly drawing up the moisture from the soil and giving it off from their foliage, such a soil would not get really dry in any drought. Weeds also give off the moisture they have drawn from the soil by their leaves; this is the reason why the weeds should be kept out of the garden. When weeds are in the seedling stage one passing of the wheel hoe kills every one. And how rapidly one can go over a garden with a wheel hoe, once or twice in a row and then in the next one and so on, fine exercise, good stand-up-to-it work that gets wholesale results quickly. Once neglect it, let the weeds get rooted and the ground hard, and you might as well hang up the wheel hoe in the shed until next year.

Of course the rows of beets and carrots have to be thinned and weeded by hand, and the hills of corn must be reduced to four stalks, and such weeds as come up in the hill will have to be pulled up; the melons have to be sprayed with Bordeaux mixture; brush or poultry netting has to be put up for peas; poles set for lima beans. There is
always work enough in a garden; that is why one should plant the whole garden in rows that admit the entire ground being worked by the wheel hoe.

Of the three mentioned plant foods, nitrogen makes stalks and foliage; it is best for lettuce and cauliflower and all vegetables of which we eat the leaves, such as spinach, rhubarb and the like; though corn and melons, and in fact all plants except peas and beans require some nitrogen. Peas and beans will sometimes refuse to grow in a soil that has too much nitrogen. Potash, especially the sulphate of potash, is the best fertilizer; it is what gives size and sweetness to the melons, strawberries, beets and the ears of corn; it can be used liberally on all fruits and vegetables with good results. Phosphoric acid is needed for seeds and flowers; it is not as important as the other two, though almost nothing will do well in a soil entirely deficient in phosphoric acid. Though some plants will not grow in a sweet soil, as huckleberries for an example, all the common garden vegetables require it. Swamps and wild land on granite rock are apt to be sour, but the average soil is sweet. If not, it can be made so with applications of lime.

Every real gardener and true countryman loves the soil; the smell of it when turned over in the sun, the feel of it under foot, its welfare is his own; he loves to patch up the thin places, blast out rocks, deepen and enrich it. The soil is our priceless heritage from geologic time; it is the insoluble residue from the crumbling of the rock; on its maintenance depends the prosperity of the race of man. And how we have misused and neglected our soil! The earth has been plowed down the hill against the fences, where it is allowed to grow brush, leaving the hillsides and ridges bare; it has been washed away and let choke up the rivers and harbors with the finest and fattest of its substance; it has been burned over, and its fertility wasted in many other ways. My father, like the true countryman that he is, always loved, indeed almost worshipped the soil. He has had more real fun and satisfaction in late years in improving pieces of land than in anything else. This last summer he found huge delight in clearing up a stony, broken pasture, blowing out the rocks and building a fence with them, leveling off the ground and getting it ready for the plow, saying: “Fifty years and more ago my father wanted to clear this field and make a meadow of it; now I am able to do it—what a fine, deep soil it has!” He would pick up a handful and rub it between his fingers or thrust the crowbar down into it to show the depth. Not to clear away any more forest, but to build up and improve some of the land already cleared, that is truly an occupation worthy of any man!