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## *Growing With Gardens - Wendi Lopatecki*

**M**y first garden began when I ripped out old boards that held two raised beds, long ignored by the previous owners of our new house in the Gulf Islands. Our first child, Taeven, barely 2, watched me with great interest, before turning to the colonies of scurrying woodbugs on the discarded boards.



Cedar & Barrie Garden

It was a season of digging up—and digging in seaweed and compost. We flung seeds around like confetti—buckwheat, phacelia, chard, kale—things quick to sprout, attractive to beneficial bugs, and nutritious to the soil. We

inspected the communities of worms and centipedes. We patted in mysterious bulbs and wished them goodnight until spring.

When spring finally came, I had a new baby boy, Cedar, in my arms. I did what I could in fleeting moments between naps, feeds, and waning young mother energies. Mostly we sat and made flowery cakes in the sandbox. We pushed in a few bean and pea seeds and let the bulbs surprise us with their unfolding, brightly coloured faces.

As a parent, I had to adapt my own expectations of the garden layout to fit the whims of my little ones. While being careful to bring awareness to Taeven and Cedar of certain details, practices and handling of tools, I learned many limits to the realm of my control. Besides, when working with such variables as sun, water and soil, how could I expect to have control?

As a toddler, Taeven hated getting any part of herself dirty or wet. She became very adept at handling shovels and rakes. Cedar, however, was not deterred by any amount of water and soil. He always wanted the hose, and we were very careful to stay out of his direct (and indirect) aim. When he was a toddler, I distracted him with other places of exploration. When he was three, I began to teach him about plant survival and water conservation.

As the ages and phases of the children grew and changed, so did the garden and our deepened awareness of all it had to offer. I marveled as they munched contentedly on kale, chard and fennel, collected heaps of peas, and absorbed themselves in the microbial world of the soil. The garden became a place to go when the day was turning tense. One fall, as I turned fresh earth for the garlic patch, mixing in rich sea-soil, Taeven began stripping off her socks and shoes. When Cedar saw her stepping with barefooted ecstasy into that soft mound of cool soil, he followed right behind. I, too, stripped off my socks and shoes. I felt the connective force of nature that has always called to me, and that, so naturally, calls to my

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children. We are of this, we are from this—we grow from this earth.

This connection to nature shows in their faces when the pile of fall leaves is finally big enough to leap into, to bury down in the leafy womb; inhaling the cycles of the trees until the echoes of life become the pulses in their veins. Gardening for children is a tactile interaction of the senses—they dig, pile, water, bury, munch, and poke at all the wriggling bugs. Growing food is a physical manifestation of what can someday translate to a feeding of the soul.

Last summer, I was asked to help in a neighbour's veggie garden. I have never turned down an opportunity for more gardening, and I was excited to have the kids experience a different garden and build a relationship with our neighbour. Barrie is a quiet, but energetic man who delighted at seeing the children running fluidly down his driveway to the garden gate.

Together we measured rows, stretched string lines, discussed flower and lettuce varieties, built bean and pea teepees, and pruned and weeded while waiting for the harvests. Sometimes Taeven would pick bunches of flowers to give to Barrie, or she would retire to a shady patch under the huge grape vine to draw. Sometimes Cedar and Barrie would take on projects together, working through mulch piles and taking wheelbarrow rides until the job was done, or until juice and cookie time. Eventually we would leave the garden with arms and baskets full of beets, beans, tomatoes, and zucchini.

Barrie also invited us to pick apples, plums and pears from his orchard. He does not need to have such a huge garden for himself, but he does because he values the simple act of growing food locally. By inviting us to join him and share in the harvest, he was fulfilling an age-old practice of community connection and sustenance. I was honoured and happy to see my children warmly befriend a community elder.

### **Pizza Garden**

That same spring, our homeschool group started a plot in a community garden. Our goal was to grow and harvest everything we would need for a pizza. We sowed a large plot of red fife wheat, and planted a three sisters garden. Having spent a day together in early spring starting seeds in containers, then nursing them at our homes, we now bent together with our spades and forks making little mounds for the three sisters, a Native American triad of corn, beans, and squash growing together. The corn stalks act as a trellis for the beans, which in turn fixes nitrogen

into the soil. The broad leaves of the squash provide shade, keeping the soil moist and cool while also suppressing weeds.

Through an arrangement with our local public school, we were fortunate to have Julie Johnston, our home-school facilitator, gardening with us. As the kids marked-out the round circle in the soil for the pizza garden and cut it up into 6 'slices' of planting area, she enthusiastically declared, 'This is what education is all about!'

Julie is a teacher and adult educator whose life work is dedicated to creating the best possible future for children—of all species. Julie has been creating Green Heart Education, a growing resource on transformative sustainability learning and environmental action. Green Heart helps teachers 'green' their curriculum, their classroom, and their school community, ([www.greenhearted.org](http://www.greenhearted.org)). She deeply understands the importance of connecting our children to the earth, and brings a shining exuberance to our group.

Through the contribution of one of our homeschool families, we were able to plant a large plot of heritage red fife wheat, the cornerstone of prairie agriculture throughout North America between 1840 and the early 1900s. Red fife wheat proved to be hardy, resistant to plant diseases, adaptable to a diversity of soil types, conditions, and climate changes, and boasted exceptional flavour.

Loiselle Organic Family Farm, the founders of the Prairie Red Fife Organic Growers Co-operative Ltd, states: 'Red fife represents hope that we can continue to provide pure food in spite of threats by genetically altered crops (GMOs) and control of the food production systems by transnational corporations. It represents farmers' rights to save and grow their own seed without having the menace of plant breeders' rights and patent infringements endangering this time-honored tradition.'

That sums up why I love to give handfuls of seeds to the small hands of children to spread along the rows. Of course, they don't need to know what dire straits our food economy is in. They just need to know that from a seed, and with the help of their own and others' hands, a feast can be created.

From the wheat, we hulled and ground enough flour to make eight large pizzas, which we garnished with veggies from our collective labour. And of course, we set aside enough seeds for our next spring planting.

### **Island Apples**

Then there are the apples. All over these islands there are

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fruit trees offering their abundance and not being picked. For three years, we have gathered a group of friends and neighbors and have collectively picked at an orchard currently owned by part-time residents, and transported the boxes to a local press to make fresh apple cider. It is so uplifting to be on a tall ladder surrounded by the smell of sweet apples, and hear the shouts of discovery from all around. Almost every tree is of a different heritage variety that is not easily recognized. With no form of identity, the best way to find out if a tree is ready to pick and juice, or if it should be kept aside for eating, is to bite into its fruit.

Because of the huge variety in this orchard, our juice is always exceptionally flavourful, and with every sip all year I remember the sunny autumn days spent in the orchard with friends, watching my children and their friends climb through the luscious branches of the trees.

A few years ago, we moved to a new property, not far from our old house. But this one is an undeveloped three acres. There is an open acre and a beautifully forested two acres in the back. It is the land of my gardening dreams. If ever I was frustrated in the past at not seeing my garden flourish fast enough, I will look back on it now as simple practice. It was a slow learning curve in the upward spiral, a pace that suited having small children and many demands of early motherhood.

I can see that Taeven and Cedar have had a fine first few years' introduction, and are ready for more hands-on work and input of ideas. We have envisioned a children's garden, a Japanese garden, an herb garden, a small orchard, and a berry patch. Our imagination takes us away into a world of colour and taste and growth. These dreams may be slow in the maturing amongst the other inspirations and aspirations of our life's path, but we can work with patience and passion. Gardening can become another integrated aspect of our daily lives as we discuss, plan, and create projects and experiments together, learning about herbs, ecosystems and permaculture.

In our societies today, there is an increasing amount of pressure and concern battering down on families, bringing newly diagnosed childhood disorders—obesity, diabetes, ADD, and Nature Deficit Disorder. When we take a look at the big picture that contributes to these epidemics, we would see the remedy: arrows pointing outwards—out to nature, out of our boxes, out into our communities.

There are many creative ways to find the space needed to grow a garden of food, from digging up lawns, joining a community garden, or by getting involved in a local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Farm. There are opportunities available near everyone of us on all of our own Islands if we are ready. Once we begin the dance of co-creating with nature herself we will start to feel the transformative energies reaching into many places of our lives and homes.

My family is lucky to be living on this little island. We are lucky, but it is also what we have chosen, and thus created. It is nothing less than the full potential of our life values that we are seeking, and we give thanks that such a path has been made clear for us to follow, a path that we have made with our own intentions and with the energies of the universe.

Our children may take on many other values than we have in their long and unfurling lives, but we believe that the universal value, that we all struggle to find, is a connection back to the very mother we all sprang from, the mother whose body feeds us, whose breath sings to us, whose tears wash us, and whose heartbeat gives us our passions.

The power of authentic connection is a deeply satisfying force, and our yearnings for it lead us down many pathways of experience. The singular source for all the connecting in the world begins with our love and nurturing of the earth, of our earth, our first story of birth.

Seeing this life force so pure and vibrant in the eyes of my children inspires me to give them many opportunities to discover the intricate web of nature through the simple act of gardening and growing food. It is my hope that they will carry this on into their lives as they make decisions for themselves and for the future of our earth. ✍

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