

Garden Stories
By Patsy Kuipers, Guest Writer

Today's Treasure

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food . . . The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

Genesis 2:8-9, 15

Sometimes I muse that gardening is in my genes.

To use one of Mom's old expressions, I suppose I come by it honestly. My grandfathers supported their families by farming in central North Carolina. My grandmothers canned, preserved, or froze the excess fruits of their husbands' labors, those not consumed or shared right after harvesting.

Memories of summertime Sunday dinners around my grandparents' tables are vibrant even though decades have passed since I last sat elbow-to-elbow with relatives of multiple generations: plates of juicy red tomato slices and steaming corn on the cob; bowls full of fried okra, green beans, and lima beans; freshly-made biscuits and gravy. Laughter seasoned the conversation as family stories mingled with good-natured ribbing.

Other recollections are equally vivid – flowers edging the fields; straw hats perched on hooks by the door, ready to be grasped on the way out to the garden; a metal dipper hung on a nail above the back-porch sink for a refreshing sip of water upon returning to the house.

My mom was one of eight siblings, and my dad was one of ten. They, along with most of my aunts and uncles, gardened. Their efforts ranged from plots to grow a few vegetables to a commercial tomato farm, from fruit trees to flower-filled beds surrounding suburban homes.

Multiple members of my generation love tending plants, as do a number of our children and grandchildren. Recognizing our shared passion, I smile when cousins post pictures of their gardens, sometimes with young offspring sampling produce fresh from the vine.

And me? I'm a member of the "Play in the Dirt Club," a frequent-shopper program at a local nursery. I adopted their phrase years ago to describe my gardening ventures. Weeding, mowing, mulching, planting – I love playing in the dirt! I don't have a spot sunny enough to grow veggies, so my gardening efforts are aimed at tending plants of the decorative variety. The delight I feel in caring for my flowers and shrubs is enhanced by the connection to generations of loved ones and the communion I feel with God and His creation.

Maybe the notion that gardening is in my genes isn't so far-fetched, at least when you consider where God placed our very first ancestors. The Garden of Eden was an idyllic place where all sorts of plants thrived, and God strolled in the cool of the evening. He entrusted Adam and Eve with the responsibility of maintaining the garden and gave them all the plants as food, save one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. One exception amidst unimaginable abundance, yet Adam and Eve didn't obey. Satan cunningly twisted God's command, and Eve ate, believing the Serpent's lie that God was withholding something pleasant and necessary. She offered Adam a bite and he ate. In a moment, everything changed.

But God came to the garden, as always, even though He knew of their disobedience. He drew them out of their hiding place. In the midst of declaring the penalties they'd incur, including loss of intimate communion with Him, God planted a kernel of hope, a promise they could count on. One day the Seed of the woman would bruise the head of the Serpent, dealing death itself a fatal blow.

Centuries passed, and the time came for God to send His beloved Son so that whoever believed in Him would not perish but have everlasting life. Jesus left His place at the Father's right hand and dwelt among us for a while. On the night of His betrayal, He retreated with His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. With sorrow weighing heavily on His soul, He fervently prayed that the cup might pass from Him, yet He remained perfectly obedient to His Father's will, even to the point of death on the cross.

There was a new tomb in the garden near the place of Jesus' crucifixion. Joseph of Arimathea placed His body in that tomb, but death couldn't hold Him there. On the third day, God raised Him by the power of the Spirit. His atoning sacrifice made it possible for us to once again enter God's presence unafraid and savor communion with our Maker.

LIFE-GIVING ENCOURAGEMENT

So many significant garden events in His-story, with more to come. Jesus promised to return. When He does, heaven and earth will pass away, making way for the new

heaven and new earth where God will dwell with His people forever (Revelation 21:1-4). Creation will be redeemed right along with the children of God. And there will be a garden, watered by the stream flowing from the throne of God, where the tree of life will flourish.

God's beautiful mission to redeem a people for Himself is one continuous story from beginning to end. Could it be the sweet connections woven through generations of gardeners in my family are rooted in echoes of Eden? Our hearts harbor a deep-seated longing for perfect communion with God in a world unmarred by sin. No more thistles and thorns. No more pain or tears or death. One day it will be so.

PRAYER

O Lord, as we wait for Jesus' return, You give us hints of heaven – fruits and flowers and fresh-from-the-field vegetables, gatherings with friends and family around food-laden tables, and moments of communion with You while playing in the dirt. Let us give thanks, remembering even the most splendid day here is a mere shadow of the beauty that awaits in the redeemed garden.