

The Yield of Purple-Podded Green Beans



It begins in March with a ring of the telephone. “I can’t remember,” he says without preamble, “if you liked the purple-podded green beans you planted last year, or if they were just ordinary.”

“Just ordinary, and the yield was low.”

“But colorful.”

“Well, yes, they were colorful,” I agree.

“I think I’ll order some,” says my father. “If they make me laugh when I look at them, it’ll be worth the \$1.98 for seeds.”

From the season of seed catalogs through the season of paperwhites, my father and I talk a lot about gardening. For months on end, our language is that of soil and tools and perennials. He gives advice, which I sometimes take, and I give advice that he inevitably improves. We talk by phone for at least an hour on 5c Sundays. On weekday evenings we hold catch-up conversations. They begin without introduction. There’s no “How are you?” or “Working on anything new?” Just “Well, I think I’ve invented a revolving compost bin” or “The chives have taken over the rose bed” or “I have so much basil that I’m giving it away.”

Two years ago I began to worry about all this gardening talk. It was my neighbor Henry’s fault. Shoveling beside me after a February snowstorm, Henry confided that he had contentedly talked cars and sports with his father until the day his dad keeled over—while shoveling, as it happens. “I realized that we’d never had a significant conversation and now it was too late,” Henry said. I was stricken with guilt. All these years, I had been discussing with my father the merits of egg shells in the compost bin versus directly in the soil when I could have been sharing emotional truth. Given

my father’s propensity for clambering into 40-foot oak trees to do his own pruning, it could be too late sooner than not.

What was my hesitation? After all, when my mother and I talk we discuss *LIFE*. Work, health, the decline of civilization, the mores of modern society—“Have you heard that your cousin Ted is marrying his brother’s former mistress?”

“Which brother?”

“Harry. And Harry’s wife refuses to go to the wedding.”

“Silly of her. After all, Ted is marrying Harry’s *former* mistress.” We pause to contemplate the seating arrangements at the wedding.

I tried the societal analysis gambit on my father early in the planting season. “Do you think Harry has a current mistress?”

“Well, he does like to spread himself around. He’s just like the peppermint I planted last year. Damn stuff is everywhere, but I’ve decided to relax and let the bees enjoy it.”

I tried solicitous inquiries about his health. “Mum said your eyes were bothering you.”

“Oh, I’ll be fine as long as I can see to transplant the marigolds. Did I tell you I have five volunteer potato plants? I know I just missed digging them last year, but they seem like a gift from Mother Nature.”

I gave up and reverted to garden talk. Then, last year in the midst of a conversation about asparagus, I realized that my father has been sharing emotional truth all along.

“What do you mean you’ve never been willing to plant asparagus, Pop?”

“It takes three years before you have a good harvest.”

“But you’ve been living in one place for over 30 years!”

“True, but we might have moved. We still might move. I don’t want to feel tied down.” My father, the 70-year-old free soul.

I began to discover the man with whom I’ve been talking all these years. He is appreciative. *They seem like a gift from Mother Nature*. He is inventive. *I think I’ve designed a new revolving compost bin*. He is observant. *Cousin Harry is like peppermint*. He is experimental. The chives took over the rose bed because he planted them there to fend off black spot. He says it works. “But,” says my enthusiastic father, “even if it didn’t work as I hoped, the chives still look beautiful beneath the roses.”

My neighbor Henry moved away before I could tell him that contented conversations are always a good thing, and that the laughter produced by \$1.98 worth of purple-podded green beans is more important than their yield.

—Aurelia C. Scott gardens in Portland, Maine.