

We're All In This Together



Barbara Haas

I imagined my fellow gardeners and I sitting there one of these days, exchanging tips and techniques on how to grow heirloom tomatoes and native maize and feeling the camaraderie that results from shared goals, interests and attitudes.

THE RULE WAS SIMPLE: WHENEVER I went to my garden plot I did so by bike, trowel in my back pocket, twin panniers ready to tote the cucumbers, radishes, peas, and squash I hoped to harvest. The city maintained a space just north of Squaw Creek: ten by forty foot parcels, thirty-five of them in all. Although the soil was poor—a mix of construction fill, clay, gravel, and hardpan till—the area received abundant sunshine under an open sky. We had a pump, a compost pile, plenty of mulch, a wheelbarrow for everyone to use, and a shared pitch fork—not to mention various wren houses for the songbird residents and hummingbird feeders here and there. A picnic table stood under a broad redwood shade arbor, and I imagined my fellow gardeners and I sitting there one of these days, exchanging tips and techniques on how to grow heirloom tomatoes and native maize, and feeling the camaraderie that results from shared goals, interests, and attitudes.

Community, you know?

The city tilled the whole area early in April, assigned the plots, got a written agreement from all of us not to spray anything in or around the beds, and one chilly afternoon I put in one hundred feet of English peas.

Wind blew from the north, and though

the strengthening sun felt warm through my fleece, the icy breath of Arctic air nullified it. The tiller's blades had chunked up cinder-block sized clods that were easy to pulverize with my trowel. Hot work, nonetheless, all accomplished in a crouching position. After a while I peeled off the fleece and draped it over my bike. I spent the next thirty minutes duck-walking along the rows, planting peas.

A dense fringe of cottonwoods, willows, and silver maples kept nearby Squaw Creek hidden, but its presence was apparent nonetheless. Often I crumbled a handful of soil and caught a whiff of river water—dank, pungent, dark.

When I stood up to stretch, a man on a bicycle zipped past me, called out a pleasant greeting—"Nice morning!"—and then disappeared into the woods riding toward the creek. I stared after him. A gap in the trees I'd not noticed before gave way to a narrow trail, scarcely more than a deer path. Even in April the thatch of foliage was dense enough, though, that the bright new leaves quickly swallowed the man up. After I finished a row of arugula and radishes, I went over to the redwood shade arbor, sat backwards at the picnic table, leaning on my elbows, and studied the plots—scruffy and depleted-looking still, the soil windswept and wintry gray in color, as inauspicious as any bare tract of dirt on a raw April day. But I loved

already the ways it would connect me with like-minded gardeners in mutual respect for green growing things, earthworms, and summer's slow pace.

The man on the bicycle rode back out of the woods, this time with another fellow on a bike right behind him. They paid me no mind, followed the pebbly lane out of the community garden, and vanished into the city.

Over the next month I biked to my plot three times a week to do some weeding and mulching and, once the fear of frost had passed, more planting. Often I'd see a Baby Boomer-type guy tending a double plot on the side nearest the picnic table. He always wore faded Birkenstocks, bib overalls, and a pith helmet plastered with peace signs. His name was Michael, and he told me he was helping his mom with her garden.

"Been working the same couple plots for nine years." He was holding an ax with a rusty iron head, and its hickory handle looked to be water-damaged, like the thing had been stored wet. But in the sphere of community gardening an ax was absurd; our space had no stumps to remove, no tree roots to contend with, nothing to hack, chop, or split.

But that was Michael all up and down—the court jester of black earth. Over the course of the summer I would learn that he believed the government had orchestrated the shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school, just as it had the attacks on September 11, and that any day now he was going to win the lottery, after which he would declare himself a non-profit "so the assholes can't tax me!" No matter Michael's mood—angry, upbeat, or spirited—his eyes betrayed a nervy wildness.

Each time I stopped by to garden, a man

would bike into the woods at some point and another man would bike out, a predictable to and fro, screened somewhat by scrubby creekside overgrowth. Several times a thirty-something blonde woman pulled up in a late-model Pontiac, parked on the grass near where the men came out of the woods, and she walked in. Usually she came back out a little later with a couple of the men, and they'd sit at the picnic table under the shade arbor, smoking, drinking beer, talking. When the days began to warm, I noticed a couple of children's bikes leaning against the picnic table and also some plastic toys parked there—sun-faded L'il Tykes scooters and pedal cars like my son had ridden when he was four. When a primer-colored van pulled up near the trail and a youngish dad got out with three kids under the age of five, I thought maybe they were going fishing.

"Grandpa! Grandpa!" the little girl called out. She went skipping into the woods.

The dad looked distracted trying to keep his children together. "Get over here," he barked to the older boy, a ginger-haired five-year-old who clearly wanted to chase butterflies across a grassy stretch under one of the wren houses, not follow the trail toward the creek. Once they disappeared into the woods, happy chatter got punctuated now and then with their dad's voice erupting through the trees. I never saw Grandpa.

One sunny afternoon in May the blonde woman was seated at the picnic table with the youngish dad and a couple of the biking men. Kids played nearby. Leaning against the picnic table, its rear rack outfitted with a plastic crate for toting recyclables, was a 10-speed. I put down my trowel and walked not toward the picnic table, the picnic table where I still imagined myself communing with

other gardeners about beets, peas, beans, and mustard greens, but away from it, into the woods.

Dappled sunshine gave the dirt trail an underwater look, splashing it here and there with wavering light and shadows. Narrow tire tracks and the cloven hoof strikes of deer had rutted the dusky soil, all the steady back-and-forth traffic keeping the trail hard-packed and weed-free. After only a few paces I saw the tents—semi-permanent structures of blue tarps and plastic sheeting, each of them suspended from cables strung between trees. The sloped bank of Squaw Creek lay just beyond, and I could smell the water—heavy, fetid.

A tent city neighborhood tucked just beyond the garden plots.

I turned to retrace my steps and nearly bumped into the guy with the 10-speed bike. We said hello. He had a frank glance, grizzled whiskers on sun-weathered cheeks, and ruddy, wind-burnt ears. A couple empty bottles clinked together in the crate bungied to his bike's rear rack. Back on my own turf, standing in my ten by forty plot, I twined pea tendrils around chicken wire and thought about it all. They were the regulars at the community garden, and they had nothing to do with planting, staking, or weeding. They had seen me enter the trail, had seen me wander into their neighborhood. Mr. 10-Speed had biked over to see what was up.

The essence of community is that we're all in this together. Whatever this is. Even when we know what this is, it's often subject to change. The Tent City guys and I all got around on bicycles. So we were kind of in community, right? Except I biked because I had made an arbitrary rule: whenever I came to the garden

I would not drive my car. They biked out of necessity. (Or were their own late-model sedans parked elsewhere?) I was like them to a point, but not really. Their community intersected only glancingly, spatially, with the garden. Their affairs had nothing to do with it. This crazy quilt of chard, carrots, and spinach might have been a place paved with asphalt or a weed patch for all that it involved the Tent City guys. They sped past the green growing things, getting on with their day.

Peas blossomed white in late May—all one hundred feet of them—and attracted scads of honey bees. When I dug around in the compost pile, loading up the wheelbarrow, a Western ribbon snake sunned itself on a dry mound of leaves, eyeing me. Watchful wrens serenaded me from cedar birdhouses. Now and then a doe and her two fawns grazed at the edge of the woods. Hummingbirds fluttered at the nectar feeders. I felt like I was gardening in a Disney movie.

Storms pounded our town that night, tore open the darkness with spikes of lightning, pelted my patio with rain forceful enough to dance, like popcorn in a hot pan. We got three inches before dawn. I stood at the patio door in the strobe of lightning, thinking about the Tent City men under their tarps. On average, a raindrop strikes the ground at twenty miles per hour. This was no Disney movie.

I was staking and tying my tomato plants one morning and thinking about going over to introduce myself to a fellow gardener. She was working her own plot across the way. Michael sidled up to me, tipped his pith helmet back with the handle of his ax, and began railing against "THE CITY"—those do-nothing "assholes who speed through town in carbon-

emitting gas guzzlers” and over-regulate us. His eyes had a fierce, jangly cast, full of heat. Whenever he spoke of “THE CITY” he did so in Caps Lock. A hologram foil peace sticker was curling from the underbrim of his pith helmet, and it flashed as he railed.

I glanced wistfully at the other gardener. Stringy hair, shabby clothes, beat up Cubs cap shading her face—she looked homeless, though I knew her to be an elected member of the town’s school board, already mid-way through her second term on the board, an advocate for merit pay for teachers, slow growth in the district, and careful use of taxpayer dollars.

I wasn’t exactly camera-ready for the cover of *House & Garden*, either. This ragged pair of button-fly Levi’s had become part of my uniform, jeans I had not washed since planting peas in April. The community garden was giving everyone a homeless look.

The guy on the 10-speed had ridden out of the woods and parked off to the side, just beyond Michael’s shoulder, and he began sorting through a wad of plastic bags. “Canning’s not what it used to be,” he muttered.

Michael turned to him. “Nothing’s what it used to be.” He launched another tirade against THE CITY.

Because I was fiddling with the tomatoes and trying not to knock any of the still-green fruit off by accident, I flashed generically on “canning”—as in pressure cooker, boiled water bath, scalding the Ball jars, 90-degree heat, sweltering late August humidity. “Everybody used to can,” I said. “Now nobody knows how.”

Mr. 10-Speed continued organizing his plastic bags. That’s when it hit me—canning, recycling aluminum, 5-cent deposit. Oh.

He climbed onto his bike and disappeared

into town, an unending harvest of pop cans awaiting him. *This*, I thought—as in *We’re all in this together*. *This* had defined itself. I knew what *this* was, even if in truth we weren’t really in it together, not constantly, not all the time.

Michael watched him ride away, his chin tilted up in admiration. “Can you imagine being so free?”

I crouched down again before my tomatoes. “No responsibilities,” Michael said. “No longer a number. Nameless, faceless, not in the system. Off the grid. No longer part of the problem.” His eyes grew shiny, like happens for some people when they hear patriotic songs.

Freedom knows no price . . . I didn’t say it, just thought it: The Tent City guys were earning it nickel by nickel.

When I went on vacation in June, I tacked a sign to the post in front of my plot: *Gone for a week! Help yourself to the peas!* The day I got back I found pods bursting on the vines, the heaviness pulling the chicken wire down, sugars already turning starchy. Seven pounds! Deer had casually grazed through my rows, a few nibbles here, topping a plant there, but nobody had picked a thing.

Michael walked over while I was in a frenzy of crouching, stooping, and picking and told me that he had just mowed his mom’s lawn on 9th Street. He described painting the number 25 on a metal trash can lid and then hanging it medallion-like around his neck “because the assholes are always speeding.” He clenched the handle of his ax. “Everyone should know the speed limit on 9th Street,” he said. “They just should.”

I was reaching deep into a thicket of peas to pick that just-right pod hanging almost out of reach.

Michael said he kept getting emails from “THE CITY” reminding him not to spray any substance in or around the garden. Apparently an anonymous community member had said he was spraying something.

“Pine Sol,” he said. “Simply Pine Sol. To repel deer.” From under the brim of his pith helmet, his angry gaze bore into me, gauging whether I believed him or not. He told me he had been acquiring cast off old computers and DVD players so he could melt them down “for the carbon.” He had started mixing this rendered carbon into our community compost heap. “We eat the vegetables grown from the carbon-laced compost. Who knows what diseases this stuff will cure some day?” Recounting the long-term health benefits of his handiwork appeared to cheer him. “Sometimes you have to do what’s helpful for people,” he said, grinning, “even if they don’t know you’re doing it.”

I glanced at his ax, taking this in.

There’s a side to community gardens that doesn’t show.

Where I had at one time envisioned myself getting ideas from other gardeners on new ways to train beans over a trellis or deal with slumping tomatoes, I now spent a lot of time listening to Michael sputter and spit about “THE CITY” and prattle on about bolstering our produce with “carbon,” whether we wanted “carbon” or not.

Soon after that *The New York Times* did a splashy photo spread on Wall Street investment bankers who, hit hard by the recession, had begun renting space in a midtown Manhattan garden as a means of cutting back on expenses, growing their own food. I studied the picture of a thirty-something woman hilling potatoes. She looked healthy, pleased with her

resourcefulness, bringing the kind of can-do attitude to zucchini and onions and turnips that she probably brought to her desk job in high finance. A ring of curls encircled her head, like the laurel wreath a harvest goddess might wear. She had a happy Demeter look.

I showed the article to my seventeen-year-old son. All summer long he had heard me relate funny stories about the doings at my garden. He tapped the photo and smiled over at me. “I wonder if she’s having weird encounters with conspiracy theorists while she weeds.”

When you garden in community, you have to trust the person beside you, hoe in hand—or in Michael’s case, an ax. In a disquieting way, Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall” came to mind, not for what everyone always remembered, erroneously, about it—the warm neighborly feeling of two land owners working side by side to rebuild the dividing wall between their fields—but for what no one seemed to remember accurately—the final image of the poem: “I see him there / Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top / In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed, / He moves in darkness.”

Heavy metals, melted DVD players, nickel cadmium, mercury oxide, naphthalene solvents, contaminated water, strontium 9 leaching into our soils. Was community making me paranoid?

No, it was making me sneaky.

Knowing that Michael would never be there at 6:30 AM, I began biking over early on summer mornings to pick and weed. Knowing he had spiked the compost heap, I didn’t draw from it again. In the morning the picnic table under the shade arbor always held a collection of empty Colt 45 quarts, Red Bull cans, and longneck bottles—the flotsam of late night partying.

Sometimes a citronella candle or two still flickered on a chipped plate, as if on an altar. Sunlight sparkled on the brown bottle glass when I rode past the picnic table. One morning I left a couple bike helmets there, helmets my son and I no longer used. For the kids.

After making a few discreet phone calls I learned that the Tent City guys were already in touch with Beyond Welfare and the Emergency Shelter in town. A bike shop on Main Street serviced and maintained equipment for the guys, on the house, replacing balky derailleurs, changing flats. Several local physicians hosted a free clinic on Thursday nights and dispensed pharmaceuticals without charge. Home Depot made tarp donations, Target extra blankets, Walmart lawn chairs and coolers. One social agency or another served a hot meal in town every evening of the week. Even a bound and determined church lady might be hard-pressed to figure out how to help these guys. They received every assistance possible—short of the one that would actually relocate them to a bricks and mortar house. Not that I knew what force on earth could do that for them. Or if they even wanted that.

Can you imagine being so free?

By late August summer had turned cooler than normal, and my tomatoes, cucumbers,

and squash quit bearing. Or maybe it was Pine Sol?? Carbon?? The weeds even gave up. Some, like goldenrod, never bloomed at all. The bull thistle, an invasive species from Minnesota, stood inert, its buds shriveled.

The city told us they would plow all the plots under come mid-October.

“THE CITY . . . ” I could hear Michael’s voice.

I broke my simple rule—always bike to the garden—and drove my Prius one September morning at 7 AM to drop off a summer’s worth of recycling—cans and pop bottles—leaving it all in cartons and plastic bags on the picnic table—liquid assets, these, easily changed into cash.

In November I saw a couple Tent City guys on their bikes, scouring the winding boulevards around Fraternity Row, intent on the dull silver of aluminum, the glitter of bottle glass. They had bungied large produce crates to their rear racks, ready for a big haul. Our paths crossed at the grocery store that winter, too, I walking out with my broccoli, they redeeming their cans. My season had ended. Theirs was year ‘round.

I thought about the land that had brought us together, that scrabbly, poor-soil stretch near Squaw Creek, now powder-dusted with snow. Not the community I expected or even wanted. But it’s what I got. ❖

