

A GARDENER'S STORY

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Like you perhaps, I am one of those people who has moved often from one place to another throughout my life. As a child this began happening every three years or so after my father lost our first house to alcoholism, the house where I got my first introduction to gardening.

My uncle Richard, home from World War II where he walked across Europe with George Patton's troops, enlisted me to painstakingly plant rows of bulbs there—gladiolas, tulips, daffodils. We also carefully planted petunia and zinnia seeds in tiny holes in the backyard, and hundreds of them took off, becoming small sprouts, maturing into green plants with brilliant flowers. We watched all the stages of their growth and marveled at them, and I learned I could count on tiny seeds to bring new life into our world. We were the soldier and the little kid. I became a gardener then, drawn in by the colors of the petals—the bold oranges and the sunflower yellows and deep, deep pinks.

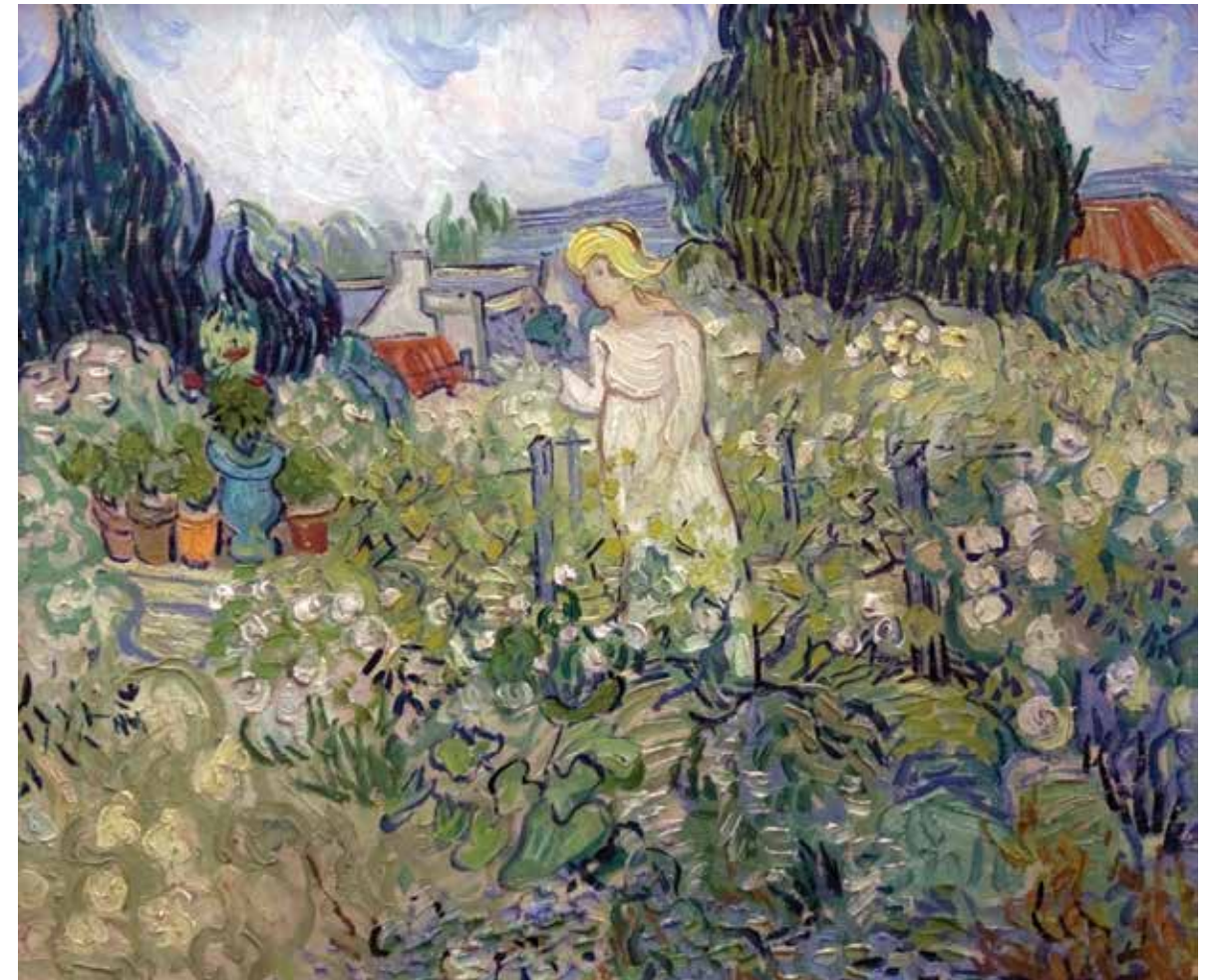
It was the 1950s, and back then my Uncle

Richard bought the first TV on the market, and we watched *As The World Turns* together and planned more gardens in the huge backyard. He even showed me how to build a snow fort in the winter, but what mattered most was the planting and the connection with the earth. His garden changed the rest of my life, and after the house was sold and I began moving around with my mother and father, I never forgot what he gave me. "Once you find out you're a gardener, things change," he said. "It moves you in another direction." I still remember the joy on our faces at the first blooms, no matter how much the war had taken out of him. The time we spent colored the way I saw the physical world from then on.

But I had no permanent sense of the earth and gardening until I was an adult and living in upstate New York where I was a college student studying in the English department, an undergraduate student at Syracuse University. Back then, I studied with a poet in the writing department named Philip Booth, a tall strapping man from Maine who took me

on as a protégé in a time when women poets were finding a place for themselves in the 1970s. Booth's house in Fayetteville, outside of the city of Syracuse, was in horse and farm country, and each year, he and his family picked up and went to their home in Maine. Philip invited me with my now ex-husband to

Philip Booth was preparing a book of poems at the time called *Margins*, and we spent time one afternoon brainstorming titles in his office before he and his family left for the summer. "I set up the garden for you," he told me with a keen eye. Knowing I had a summer of computer math classes at



Vincent van Gogh, *Marguerite Gachet in the Garden*, 1890.

live in the house and take care of his two dogs, an Airedale and a basset hound named Mona. I jumped at the chance to escape the tiny World War II barracks-style housing where we lived in Syracuse proper.

the university and a house to care for out in the country before grad school at the end of summer, the garden sounded like too much for me, but I could not have been more willing. At the house on the way out the door,



Vincent van Gogh, *Marguerite Gachet in the Garden*, 1890.

he talked to me about the garden again. He had several rows already in the works, and he had kept the dirt there fertile over the years. The other rows, he told me, would take a little prep. Philip Booth was a protégé of poet Robert Frost at Amherst and a black-and-white picture of the two of them in front of a garden was hanging over the desk where I did my work while I was there. It was certain inspiration for me at the time.

Within days the garden became part of my consciousness.

Booth had carved out a rectangle on the lee side of his ranch house, and he had raked out the leaves he threw in as fertilizer during

the previous October. The leaves fed the soil. The garden was the first one of my own, and it came to me easily. I bought seed packets at ACE hardware store in the village on my trip there with Mona, Booth's ancient basset hound, who sat patiently in the back of my blue Volkswagen hatchback. I picked what to grow intuitively: peas (my favorite because of the tiny flowers and the tendrils), lettuce (a small Bibb variety), radishes (red ones), green beans, parsley, zucchini, green chard, sunflowers, and nasturtium. Ten packets in all. After stopping at the market, I squeezed the groceries into the car with Mona in the back seat along with five small tomato plants.

My grandmother had been a farmer in a small village outside of Prague in Bohemia. She moved her big family to the meadows of New Jersey in the late 1800s. My father had worked on the farm all through his boyhood. He was her thirteenth child, and he knew how to farm inside and out, but this was my first real experience. I had moved from house to house as a child growing up with no permanent land other than the place we lost when I was young; I did not know it would be so magical.

On the day I bought the seeds, I stared at the giant rectangle outside the house from the kitchen window. Mona and I finally went outside and walked around it, studying it as if learning while I did. It was dirt, black loose dirt fertilized over the winter with Philip's chopped up leaves. I made five rows and planted each seed as if it was a religious event of some kind, and maybe it was. I planted the tomato plants at the end of each row and placed bamboo poles next to each one. I found the poles in the garage and eased them into the dirt next to each tomato plant so as not to disturb any of the tiny plant's roots.

It all seemed simple once I was done, but for me it was a great mystical act and gave me a serious connection with the earth. My first. Everything grew in the garden. I learned right away. The garden taught me about the earth, and it taught me I was responsible for taking care of the land and all of the life on it. It led me years later to become a practicing Buddhist, and it taught me to include environmental studies in my composition classes long before it was cool to do so.

Who knew so much would take hold from Philip's idea? You never know what will come from connections. Philip Booth passed away in 2007, but I think of him often as the

man who connected me to the earth. What a difference it has made in my life. And how simple. The garden made me fall in love with what I already knew about the world around me. The flowers, herbs, the vegetables that grew in Fayetteville taught me how important they were, how perfect watching them grow in the light could be. How they glistened and took form and how they were free. I have been an organic gardener for many years, passing the idea of gardens on to students everywhere, whenever possible.

My stay at Booth's house marked the end of my marriage and the beginning of many rough times in my life, but it also changed the way I saw writing poetry and growing gardens, and it taught me that it was okay to take chances on something new at any age. Many hundreds of published poems later, I am still writing about gardens. There are also new blooms in each poem. If you haven't tried growing a garden, try it. It will change your life.

After teaching college and running my father's business in Teterboro, New Jersey, after he became ill, I decided it was time to radically change my life. I wanted to include growing what I needed to live, whether in a garden or a small home farm. My family's experiences on my grandmother's farm were part of my thinking for many years, and my father's description of living on a farm always stuck with me.

"I picked strawberries for 5 cents an hour as a kid," he would tell me this so often that I could predict when he was about to say it. And I knew exactly how, as a young boy, he carried the hot bricks upstairs to wrap in the feather comforters to keep his family warm on cold winter nights on the Little Ferry Farm. That was for me the beginning of the

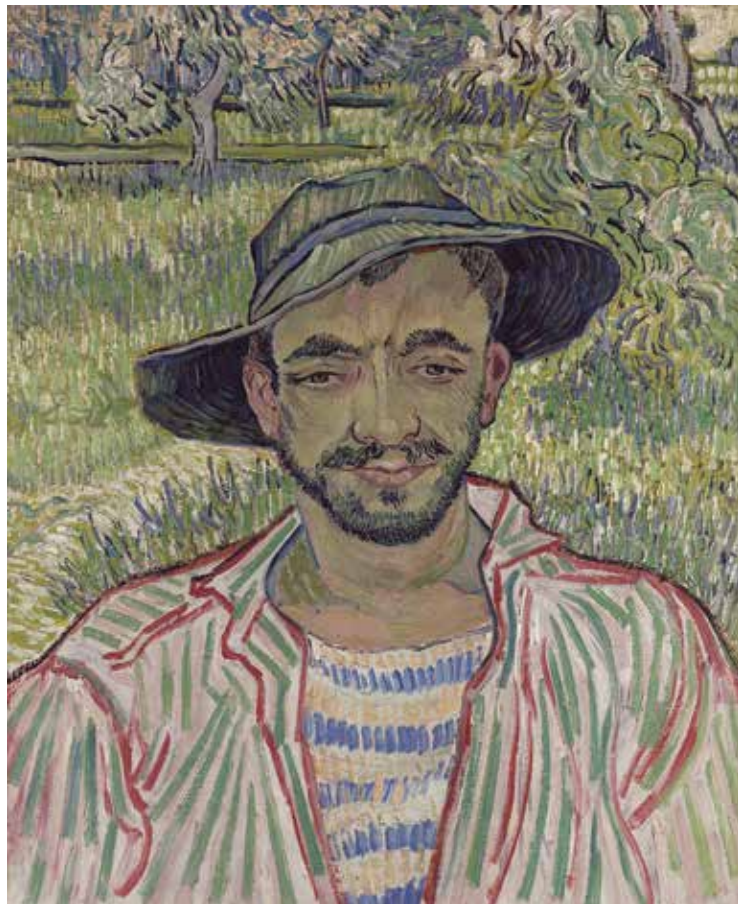
historical blind—with my father living in two periods of history at the same time. Coupled with this was my firm belief that what happened in the past always paled before what was current—progress was supposed to be linear.

When I was in high school, I received a scholarship to attend a private prep school in Massachusetts. My mother's boss at Kerr Concrete Pipe Company, where she worked in West Paterson, gave scholarships to young male engineering students to go to school, but her boss made a gender exception for me for me when my mother said she wanted to send me somewhere "more cultured." Northfield, a 100-plus-year-old school, espoused the philosophy that each girl be taught to do everything needed to self-sustain a life.

As time went on, my mother came to believe I was spending too much time washing dinner tins, picking apples, and sweeping up the cow stalls and not enough time on what she called cultured activities, not to mention more Algebra. But no amount of parental dissatisfaction ever changed Northfield's approach to education. The school clearly considered an appreciation for land to be as important as learning.

This idea stayed with me as did my understanding of my grandparent's lives and their farm. My grandparents Josef Fuchs and Mary Nedvedova, traveled to the United States in

1898 from a small village outside Prague, a renowned city in the then-country of Bohemia (now it is the Czech Republic). They had always been farmers, so it made sense to move to the meadows in New Jersey, a rich stretch of land near the Hudson River across from the borough of Manhattan. They started a farm in the town of Little Ferry where the family raised vegetables and chickens on a good-sized piece of land with deep blackish soil until it was built over with apartment houses. But at the turn of the last century, the farm flourished with six other Czech farms and a Sokol Hall where my family still spoke Bohemian and went to school for academics and gymnastics. My grandmother gave birth to thirteen children, and she sold vegetables out of a horse-drawn wagon to residents



Vincent van Gogh, *The Gardener*, 1889.



Vincent van Gogh, *Daubigny's Garden*, 1890.

of the neighboring towns near the Hackensack River. In the photos I see clearly they look like farmers. They never wore formal clothes, no suits or ties. In the picture, I also see that my grandmother's hands were firm, nurturing, farmer's hands. My mother called them the farmers. "Don't be like the farmers," she'd sometimes say to me, especially on Sunday mornings when I sat near the sec-

ond-floor window of the brick garden apartment house in Maywood and looked out at the rows of brick garages. My job was to peel the potatoes. Back then in 1958, I'd walk in the fields behind the apartments late in the day to where I thought I'd find the tall reeds. I waited for a sight of a red-winged blackbird, which at the time I believed had magical powers. I loved to collect the tall meadow

reeds and dry them in order to burn them later as punks to keep the bugs away. My father taught me how to make them. He told me it was important knowledge to be able to connect with the land wherever I lived. At other times, my mother told me the farmers were Bohunks. “Don’t be a Bohunk, honey.” She said this to impress on me the importance of working in an office and getting a job away from dirt. In other words, she taught me in order to improve myself I had to stay away from dirt. She was a woman who always dressed up like a woman out of a fashion magazine and loved to work in an office. In spite of all her proselytizing, I always stopped at the roadside vegetable stands in north Jersey and bought more than I could. “Local produce is best,” my father used to say when I was young. So we would drive down the Jersey turnpike in the warm weather, and he’d pull off at some of the towns in the meadowlands. We’d get out of the car in Hoboken or Secaucus or Moonachie, and he would leave me at a small farm stand while he went down to a local gin mill—usually Titos in Lyndhurst (he was a serious drunk at this time), and I watched the farmers sell their corn and tomatoes. I loved it. I loved sitting in the sun on an old crate, smelling the earth and feeling the wind on my face. And when my father came back from the bar, he’d pick out some tomatoes, hold them up to the sun one at a time, turning and turning them gently in his large hairy hand until he knew which one was the right one. He held the tomato like he held a baseball (he was a baseball player when he was young). This is why I thought he was showing me a work of art. The way he touched the tomato.

After my father passed away and my mother retired to Las Vegas, I sold my house

and moved to a house on Ridge Road in Uptown Sedona in northern Arizona. I found the house almost by accident. A realtor took me to see it because it already had a small garden. The house was situated on slanted ground, up the hill from Oak Creek, Sedona, a mile high. It was mountainous as well as arid with two growing areas at once. The house I found had a fenced-in backyard with apple and apricot trees in the front yard. I could plant anything in the terra cotta soil; it was like silk to the touch.

Sedona is surrounded by wilderness and at first I was afraid of the reptiles and insects, especially at dusk. In time I learned that settlers in Oak Creek drank rose hip tea, which was why so many rose bushes had been planted on the road up to Flagstaff. Local Hopi teenagers taught me how they ate high mountain cranberries for Vitamin C.

My first intent was to make the land where I lived sufficient, producing enough fruits and vegetables to last a lifetime. I knew I wanted to simplify my life. It was in me. The draw of the land. I began to plan.

The garden was all about hard work from the beginning. It was a coming home, an anchoring, a scent of the familiar. The backyard of my house was already fenced and a small raised garden was also fenced within the fenced yard. The established garden was 100 by 20 feet. This is where I started my planting. Immediately, I saw the need for building as many raised beds as possible. All my focus was on the gardens, and in time, forty-three raised beds with terra cotta rocks were built. For sheer color, I planted giant blue Indian Spring hollyhock to grow up the back fence and giant Mexican sunflowers that grew most of the year round. Some of the heads of the sunflowers

were a foot in width and yielded enough seeds to last all year. The sunflowers, tall as people, had presences of their own. Purple cosmos, edible pansies, heart’s ease—some were cooked into soups. Edible sweet flowers grew in many colors. And the sweet peas, one of my favorites because of their tiny tendrils holding onto the poles as if for dear life, with white flowers all over them like little jewels. Red flowers brought the hummingbirds to the garden, especially around ten in the morning. I planted sage to keep evil spirits away, and this worked with a little help from some French lavender. Then the vegetables—giant squash, yellow tomatoes, beans, corn, fresh peas, green chard, and a patch of arugula for a quick salad. Each plant required infinite patience to protect it, especially the first sprouts, which I covered gingerly with a cup with the bottom removed, a moat in the sea of an infinite desert around it. The tarantula frankly scared me to death (who else is to blame for this if not James Bond?) until I learned they only came out in July when they mate. They travel with what seems like the speed of light during this month, and I avoided them at all costs. Always there was more.

A whole dinner could be made without leaving the house or buying something from the store—snow peas, small purple potatoes, pan-fried trout, peach crisp. I tracked the plants in the garden for years. Calendula for wounds, and yarrow—the flower petals were like lace. Aloe for healing. Herbs grew with irrigated water feeding the roots. The garden, the lustrous red strawberries, the smell of the soil in the night, the habit of land stuck with me. Each day, vegetables, fruit, the smooth green stems, herbs, the almond tree, raspberry bushes in a copse up in the hills, a world

that worked, a garden full of edible flowers, small daisies, nasturtium, violets for soup, plants with heart shaped leaves, a place of mint and ginger and pollinator bees. The garden took me over, endlessly, sensuously, all of a world. When I finally planned to move the gardens to another location, I lost my home and gardens because my partner refused to work with me as promised.

The Sedona gardens were a work of love as well as anything else, and I have continued to garden wherever I have lived since then. For the past fifteen years, I have lived in Palm Springs, California, one of the hottest places on Earth. Last year, some days in the summer the temperature reached 123 degrees. Gardening takes special care here. I now live in an apartment near the old oasis where the fan palm trees grow and the desert is alive with wildflowers every spring when the cactus blooms and the yucca flourishes and the tiny new sprouts cover the mesquite trees. I have managed to grow a substantial small garden on my porch, an essential tool for getting through the difficult pandemic of the last years. This past winter a large plastic pot has yielded a half dozen sunflower plants that bloomed in the middle of February. And a giant clay pot of orange nasturtium was in constant bloom. The aloe plants burgeoned beyond any expectation and the herbs—parsley, basil and arugula—were a help in the kitchen for cooking.

All these gardens in my life have buoyed me up, changed my life, helped me to stay constantly connected to the earth around me. Always I have new plans about what to plant, and I am still learning about sprouts and seeds and the dreaminess of the petals blooming in the middle of the night as they do. What a story it’s been. 🌿