

By Jim Langham

My first garden was located in the remains of what had been a small chicken yard. It was the last week of March when I was a young child and my grandmother, who lived with us, asked if I would like for her to help me put out a garden.

With the place of high esteem that gardening held in our family, I was delighted; it was a real self-esteem builder. I could hardly wait to tell neighbors in our little hamlet where drawing well water from a pump, sharing daily with neighbors and putting out a family garden was a way of life.

It was after school on a balmy afternoon. Grandma had it all set, the process and the planting. I spaded a plot in soil that housed rich manure from having housed chickens, then broke the clods down and then, with grandma's instruction, worked up the soil until it was fine enough to plant.

My first planting included peas, lettuce, onions and some of the early seedlings that could be planted on that early spring day. It was the beginning of a love affair with gardening that continues to this day, a heartwarming reminder of memories of my dad running a garden tractor and my mom and grandma in their bonnets hoeing on warm, steamy summer mornings.

For me, it was the beginning of work, something we were proud of at our country home. I never looked at it as toil, it was always a part of the teamwork that fed and cared for our family.

Since our neighborhood was composed of mainly elderly people, I took in all of the comparisons of gardening pointers that the pioneer ancestors had connected with nature around us.

For example, many of those in our little hamlet believed that ladybugs brought good luck and served as a good omen to their gardens. One possible source of the superstition could be that ladybugs served as a predator of destructive insects like aphids that can attack flowers and especially vegetable gardens.

Many of the tales that were spun from the elderly in my childhood were based around the moon. Controlling pests, fertilization, harvesting, irrigation, planting and even animal breeding were often dictated by the moon's phases.

For gardeners, the important rule was to plant above ground vegetables such as lettuce and other leafy plants "by the light of the moon," the period of the new moon when light gradually increased to full moon.

Crops that produced below the ground such as onion and potatoes were planted by "the dark of the moon," the period after the full moon when the light was said to be decreasing.

My grandmother and many others from her generation believed that by following practices such as that, crops would grow larger and more quickly with bigger yields.

I will never forget the day I came home from school and my grandmother told me that I might want to take a peak at the garden. I did and there it was, shooting plants out of the ground, dark and green, and ready to mature to harvest.

These days, gardening occurs in the backyard of daughter, Julie, who has shared in developing a nice-sized garden.

We get our heads together and manage the planting, hoeing and watering of the garden. Last summer, in the midst of heat and drought, we still had abundant harvests of tomatoes, watermelon, muskmelon, egg plant, green beans, cucumbers and various types of squash.

Two generations and an entire cycle has passed since that early March in the mid-'50s when Grandma Cook guided the planting of my first garden.

And while I appreciate the gardening wisdom I was given that day, I even appreciate more the seeds of life that were sown and distributed even to this spring, in the hearts and ambitions of our family.

In that heart's soil lies the real planting that God had intended all along.