

By Kylee Baumle

I went to visit my grandma the other day. At 98, she's a treasure and a pretty amazing person. Though she's in good health, she lives in an assisted living facility now. She's done her fair share of gardening in her day and several years ago, I sat down to talk with her about it. I was curious as to how much or how little things had changed over the years.

She was a young girl in the 1920s and that's a long time ago by anyone's standards, even hers. But some things never change, especially when it comes to the affairs of Mother Nature. Seeds get planted, they germinate, and they grow.

At the time we talked, I was starting some seeds inside in a spare bedroom that had a south window to make the best use of available light. Her mother used to do the same thing, she said, sowing things like tomatoes and cabbage in dishpans. She grew geraniums in tin cans on the windowsills in the winter, too.

When she could work the ground outside, Grandma's mom grew peas, green beans, carrots, lettuce, onions and 'Late Dutch' cabbage. She liked to make big crocks of sauerkraut out of that cabbage. She'd put the ten-gallon crock on the porch, fill it with layers of cabbage shredded with the kraut cutter and salt, mix it up really well, then lay a cutting board on top and weigh it down with a rock.

Some weeks later, stirring occasionally in the meantime, it was sauerkraut. In the winter, they'd go out and get a scoop of kraut from the crock for eating. It never froze solid, she said, because of the high salt content.

Grandma's family had a small orchard, where they grew seven varieties of peaches. In Ohio. The best, she said, were the white freestone. They also had apples, cherries, strawberries and wild blackberries, as well as a grape arbor. Oh, they had gooseberry and currant bushes, too.

There were seventeen kids in that Wistner family, so what they grew helped feed them, as was the case for nearly every farm family back then.

They canned tomatoes in tin cans, using red wax to seal the lids around the edges. Grandma remembers helping make ketchup, taking her turn stirring it on the wood stove. It required hours of stirring before it would be thick enough.

They made apple butter on the wood stove too, and canned it using the cold-pack method. There was jam to be made from the strawberries and blackberries and everything canned was kept in an up-ground cellar.

I remember Grandma and Grandpa having one of those themselves and I loved to play in that cool place as a little girl.

Grandma said her dad had a “truck patch,” which was where they grew the “big” stuff like potatoes and buckwheat. At harvest time, they’d take the buckwheat to nearby Ottoville, where the canal went through and at Lock 16 there was a mill, where it would be ground into flour.

While they grew fruits and vegetables to eat, they also had plenty of pretty flowers. Grandma remembers cosmos, marigolds, snapdragons, asters, and zinnias – all heirlooms. They’d grow nasturtiums with the cucumber vines, too, because they were supposed to keep the beetles away.

When Grandma got married and had a home and garden of her own, she had a cold frame made of two-by-fours at the side of the garage.

They’d work the ground, get a wheelbarrow load of other soil and add manure. Then they’d mix it all up with a hoe and plant the seeds. It would get covered with an old house window, with a block of wood stuck in there to keep it open just enough for ventilation. When the seedlings reached the glass, the window would come off.

There's much to learn from the older and wiser members of our family. The more things change, the more some things stay the same, and thank goodness. They experienced the same trials and tribulations that we do in our gardens today. And there's wonderful value in it, learning from their experience.

Read more at Kylee's blog, Our Little Acre, at www.ourlittleacre.com and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/OurLittleAcre. Contact her at PauldingProgressGardener@gmail.com.