

Digging Deep

Alice's Wonderland

By Cynthia Brian

"Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier." — Mother Teresa*A lavender trumpet vine covers the archway leading to the front porch.*

Photos Cynthia Brian

Every artist has her or his muse, a person who inspires, motivates, and encourages creativity. Leonardo had Lisa, Quentin has Uma, Mother Teresa had God, and I credit my mother, Alice, with being my gardening artiste. From the time that I could toddle, I was following her around our expansive gardens planted for both the edibles and the pretties.

When she and my dad first moved to their house built at the turn of the 20th century on the 365-acre ranch in the middle of nowhere, it was surrounded by brambles, blackberry bushes and poison oak. Little by little she painstakingly transformed the prickly jungle into a playful park planted with myriad beautiful flowers, herbs, trees, grasses, fruits and vegetables.

I can still smell the sweet fragrance of the spring soil as we tilled the plots designated as the vegetable garden. Mom would plant starts of tomatoes, peppers,

cucumbers, zucchini, bush beans, string beans, eggplant and whatever other vegetable caught her fancy for the year. The five kids would be given seeds of radishes, beets, corn, carrots, turnips, squash and melons to plant as we wished. Onions, leeks, garlic and Swiss Chard seemed to be in abundance year-round, as did a big patch of culinary herbs—basil, mustard, chives, dill, fennel, parsley, oregano, marjoram, mints, rosemary, sage, tarragon and thyme. We didn't have automatic irrigation. All of us were responsible for daily watering, pulling hoses for long distances as Mom always did. She showed us how to plant rows, squares, circles, how to soak each plant plentifully, what to weed and what not to touch.

We couldn't wait until summer when the first tomato ripened. With a handful of basil, we'd bite into the juicy goodness right there in the garden. One Au-

*Tomatoes ripening on the vine.*

gust she grew a five-pound tomato, won a big prize, was recorded in the newspapers, and carried it around to multiple events exhibiting its enormity to anyone interested until it rotted. Long before the trend of farm-to-table, my Mom cooked what was freshest and harvested that day. We only ate what was in season or, in the winter months, what we canned during the summer. To this day, I won't eat tomatoes, grapes or oranges out of season. Why bother? They taste like chalk. Only vine-ripened fruit and vegetables have the flavor that transport me to the joys of childhood on the farm. And what blissful days they were!

But it wasn't only the vegetable and herb gardening techniques that she was imparting. Mom also instilled in us a wistful, playful attitude in the art of gardening. "Gardens are an extension of your personality," she would tell us. And her gardens were wild, fun, surprising, eclectic and inviting. Tucked into ravines would be antique stoves with antiquated rusting teapots overflowing with succulents.

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