

NO GARDENS PERMITTED

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A walk around my neighborhood on a rare cool day in June revealed a great deal to me about gardens and why we cherish them. My walks are often meditative, and I try to notice something new every time I go out, small things about plants in others' yards. Without fail--though I have lived in the same area most

of my life--I spot things I have not noticed before, giving credence to Thoreau's philosophy that we can learn more by studying our own back gardens than by traveling to the far corners of the earth.

On my walk that June day, a fine rain began to fall as I went along, and soon I had my umbrella up in what promised to be the sort of steady, soaking rain that keeps off a drought. The plants all seemed to rejoice, from transient annual flowers, here for a season and then gone forever, to the area's oldest Oaks, fifty-year survivors of hurricanes, droughts, and poor urban forestry. Robins were out in great numbers, and they were queuing up to hunt worms in my vegetable garden and those of my neighbors. The soil was cool enough for the worms to stay near the surface, and it was not yet so wet as to drown them or drive them deep. In several yards, as in my own, I saw tomato vines

coming up strongly in their cages, cucumbers trailing along the ground, beans and annual herbs making their way toward the sun riding high above the rain clouds.

It would have been a moment for pure rejoicing had a recent story told at work not pushed its way into my reverie. A co-worker mentioned that her neighborhood association's covenant prohibited vegetable gardens, even in back yards. I was stunned, then angry, spitting out something about how as a lifelong city boy, I'd never live anywhere with a fascistic covenant, then adding what should be done with the covenant committee: baked in a pie crust and served to hungry folk who are not allowed to grow their own food.

My co-worker, who knows nothing of my spiritual connections to soil and growing things, probably just thought I was being cranky. Sadly, she'd never understand how sad I felt about a group of people who may never raise their own food, even a few salad greens. That seems crazy, as if vegetable crops are coarse, lower-class things to be banished to the countryside, somewhere out beyond the groping tendrils of our farthest subdivisions and strip-malls. The people living in no-gardens developments will never know the real heartbreaks of raising food: the late blight, the insect and chipmunk, the hailstorm in July just as the tomatoes blush pink. They'll also never know the joys: the taste of a sweet pepper or fig still warm from the summer sun, the unalloyed delight of gathering the freshest lettuce from the garden for the salad bowl (as I did just before I sat down to write this).

As gas prices fluctuate and threaten to bring on inflation such as we have not seen in three decades, I wonder what my co-worker and her neighbors would do were food prices to begin to climb monthly, were ample produce no longer available at low prices

year round. Perhaps that covenant committee would meet, with fear showing in their eyes, fear that Americans have not known since the Great Depression, and make a small rules change. Perhaps manicured turf, artificially green thanks to a diet of chemicals, would be tilled under and rows of crops would spring up in the sunny spots of backyards. Perhaps neighborhood children would know again what their parents' grandparents' knew: how good a garden-fresh tomato tastes.

I could only wonder as I finished my walk that rainy day. My spirit had not sunk too low: every generation needs to re-learn a few old lessons. I suspect that many readers of *Whole News* are old enough to recall a time when strawberries were not to be found in stores in January. A small lesson, that, but one that would make us love strawberries more than ever when we did get them. And it would be a step toward re-learning what thrift and self-reliance mean in a profligate time.

The walk ended where it began, my garden. Thinking matters over, I picked oak-leaf and butter lettuce and made a mental note to wash out the canning jars, soon to be filled with summer's abundance in July and August. As happens every year, the jars will be stored away in the darkness, but they will take a bit of summer with them, like Persephone going into the underworld. The jars, of tomatoes glimmering like rubies, pickles shining leaf-green in January, will wait in rows that echo the rows in the garden, sustaining me and mine when the ground is barren and frost is on the land.