

BRINGING BACK PAPA'S GARDEN

Papa loves vegetable gardens. He had abundant gardens for years, with spinach, tomatoes, okra, strawberries, basil, and parsley. When I was nine or ten, he stopped growing the garden. For a couple of years, the garden lay fallow, overgrown with dandelions, vines, and other weeds, and covered with leaves. He didn't smile much and he had a sorrowful face when he looked out the window and saw the unkempt garden.

One early spring day, I got a shovel and dug the weeds and leaves out and tried to loosen the dirt. The dirt was hard and I couldn't thrust my shovel down into it. So I got the hose and soaked the dirt and then my shovel slid easily into the dirt. Soon, the dirt was loose, and I broke up the big clods, raked and leveled the soil.

I carved five trenches, seven to eight feet long, about three inches across and one inch deep with a corner of the hoe blade. I dropped spinach seeds, about one inch apart, into the trenches and covered them up with dirt. I turned the hose on and held my thumb over the end and sprayed the water on the newly planted spinach seeds until there was water standing on top of the ground.

About two weeks later I planted beans, okra, and corn seeds. I dug one trench for the beans, dropped in the seeds, and set up a trellis around which the bean tendrils could twine. I sowed one row of okra, and planted the corn in a seven seed by seven seed square. Corn needs to be planted close together in a patch, rather than in one long row, so the corn kernels all get pollinated. I weaved a soaker hose in between the rows of seeds so Nana could turn it on if I wasn't there to water. I'd go over to Papa's and water and hoe up the dandelions, vines, and other weeds and destroy their root systems.

One day as I was watering, I saw rows of baby spinach leaves poking out of the ground!!! In a couple of weeks, the spinach was big and had filled out. It was ready to pick!

With scissors I snipped off enough big green spinach leaves to fill a big ceramic bowl. I took the spinach into the house, filled the bowl with cold water and let it soak so all the dirt would come off. I repeated this two times and then in a colander I rinsed the spinach to get the remaining dirt off. In a big wooden salad bowl I mixed together a spoonful of olive oil and a spoonful of vinegar, a teaspoon of mustard and honey and a dash of salt and pepper. I cut up an orange into bite-sized pieces and put the pieces into the salad bowl. Then, in went the spinach! I tossed all the ingredients with long salad spoons, scooped some salad onto Papa's dinner plate, and set the plate down on the placemat in front of him.

The corners of his mouth curved up, and his eyes sparkled. He speared the salad with his fork. The salad disappeared quickly.

He seems happy now when he looks out of the window at the garden and sees the spinach, beans, okra, and corn growing. Papa's garden is back!!!

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