

# ROW *by* ROW

TALKING WITH  
KENTUCKY GARDENERS



KATHERINE J. BLACK

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# INTRODUCTION



## *Breaking Ground*

MY FIRST GARDEN MEMORY is of being with my father, Charles Rufus. I was five or six years old, and it was a time before our relationship turned (and remained) contentious. “Come here, Katherine,” he called. He was standing in front of his workbench in the “furnace room,” which housed a massive hot water heater, central air conditioning and heating units, hand tools, screws, nuts and bolts, flashlights, hunting rifles and shotguns, ammunition, baseball bats and gloves, rubber boots, waders and hand warmers for duck hunting, shoe polish, and seeds. Daddy opened an upper cabinet that I could not reach. There next to the shotgun shells was a large, dark green canister whose original purpose was no longer obvious. He brought it down and removed the lid. “This year I am giving you your own bed. Pick what you want to plant.” He splayed pretty seed packets across the workbench, which was just at my eye level. “Go ahead. Pick.” I think my choices were mostly flowers. I based my decision probably on the color and shape illustrated on each paper envelope containing its respective seed. I remember only four o’clocks and nasturtiums with certainty. And I remember precisely where my plot was, now well over fifty years ago.

I grew up in northeastern Arkansas in Corning, a small town with a population of approximately 2,500 at the time. Our house, built in 1952,

the year I was born, sat on a three-acre parcel of low-lying land at the edge of town. My father, trained as an engineer, had drainage ditches dug around three sides of the property where the vegetable garden was situated. We tended a large, elaborate, productive garden. It was both a source of fresh food—everything from boysenberries, asparagus, and melons to corn, tomatoes, squash, and beans—and a springboard for the moral practice of labor. My father plowed, tilled, and saw to the cultivation throughout the growing season. My mother, Barbara, canned and pickled, made jams and jellies, and froze fruit and vegetables for winter use. My six brothers, my sister, and I picked the berries, grapes, beans, corn, and tomatoes, and we girls helped Mother with food preservation. In the spring we ate tender lettuces, green onions, radishes, and asparagus. During the first three weeks of May, we ate strawberries three times a day. In July and August, beans, corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, and melons were staples on our table.

The strawberry patch is what made our garden stand out among all others in Corning. We were known for our strawberries and our enterprise. Once we displayed our hand-painted sign that read “Fresh Strawberries for Sale 857-6794” in the front yard, the season had officially begun. We sold berries to restaurants—some as far as ten miles away—and to households all over town. When we had excess, after orders had been filled, Daddy or Mother telephoned old customers and solicited new ones. We children picked before we left for school, and Mother often continued into the morning before the heat and other chores called her back into the house. My parents kept meticulous business records on a stenographer’s pad. Each strawberry season they recorded how many quarts picked, how many sold and to whom, how much money taken in, and the net profit after deducting for fertilizer and straw mulch and wages to the pickers. Corky also had to be paid from the proceeds. He was an employee at our family’s sawmill who, after finishing his shift there, came to work in our garden. Corky spread the fertilizer and mulch and blocked the berries after the fruiting season.



PHOTO BY NYOKA HAWKINS

Some customers picked up their orders at our house, but we also delivered. Our strawberries were priced to sell. However, we topped off our quarts with a nice mound, never lined the bottom with inferior fruit, and only sold the freshest berries while keeping back the less desirable ones for preserves at home, and delivery was prompt and free from the back of our family Cadillac. Daddy said these strategies gave our business a good reputation.

My parents were unlikely gardeners. Mother was from Beloit, Wisconsin, and was shocked by the rural nature of her husband's hometown, where

they moved in 1939, a year into their marriage. Charles Rufus's family had settled in Corning in the late 1800s. His entrepreneurial grandfather, J. W. Black, had started over in Arkansas after he lost his family's farm and general store in southern Illinois during the bank panic of 1873. Once in Corning he opened an ice company, a mortuary, and later a pool table factory. He finally settled on a sawmill that today is in its fifth generation of family operation. With J.W.'s launch into business, the family left agricultural pursuits behind. But J.W.'s son, my grandfather, Charles Rufus Black Sr., married Bess Jane Graham, who had grown up in the Ozark Mountains on a subsistence farm. She put her vegetable patch adjacent to their substantial white frame house, both facing Second Street, which was lined with Corning's oldest homes and trees. Daddy learned how to grow food from his mother and how to make money from his father. He tried to pass these skills on to each of his eight children. Of all of us, only my sister and I took to the gardening, but we never developed the drive for profits.

After the last of us children left home in the late 1970s, my parents still continued to make a garden. Its size—half an acre—never decreased, and my mother continued to put up food as if she were still feeding a family of ten. After Mother died that stopped, but Daddy, well into his eighties, hired his grandsons and Corky to plant a garden each spring and to pick and deliver the strawberries, activities Daddy directed from a side porch overlooking his "farm." The last year of his life—at eighty-eight years of age—he laid his garden to rest, marking the retirement of one of the last home vegetable gardeners in our community.

Though I grew up in a gardening family and was taught the skills of food preservation, it was not until shortly after I moved to eastern Kentucky in 1973 that I began to raise a garden on my own without parental design and direction. The art and practice of gardening was alive and well, even if in decline, in eastern Kentucky. Gardening and food preservation still bolstered many household economies in addition to providing the foodstuffs for which Appalachian Kentucky cuisine is noted: green beans, potatoes, corn, blackberries, and apples. Growing eggplant was

seen as peculiar, whereas saving several kinds of beans—what now would be called “heirloom beans”—was more or less the norm. Men with tractors would plow and harrow their neighbor’s garden for next to nothing, and friendly competitions arose among neighbors over who had the earliest Black Seeded Simpson lettuce or whose tomatoes produced first. In this congenial atmosphere, with skilled gardeners around to advise me and the freedom to experiment, I became a gardener in my own right.

At the same time as I was developing my own gardening practices, I was also being influenced by the radical politics of the 1970s—especially feminism, environmentalism, and anti-imperialism. My relationship with my conservative, businessman, gardening father only grew pricklier. In eastern Kentucky, though, I was surrounded by young people in the back-to-the-land movement and involved with those empowered by the emergence of Appalachian identity politics, both of which heralded traditional cultural practices such as gardening and canning. In this heady mix of political and cultural upheaval, I felt free, and even compelled, to take up organic gardening. I came to believe, and still do, that my responsibility is to improve the land while tending it. Growing my food organically was also another realm in which I could rebel against my father, who used chemical fertilizers, insecticides, and fungicides with abandon. And yet, looking back, I think I reasoned that by using organic methods I need not reject gardening, and if I could garden then the one positive tie I had to my father would not be broken.

Since 1986 I have lived in Lexington. I have had two homes, neither of which came with a garden. I had to make them. Each has been smaller than my family’s garden and the ones I tended in eastern Kentucky. Because of space considerations, I no longer grow corn, and I use large containers and raised beds to increase the dimensions of my garden. With these amendments I am able to raise a variety of fruits and vegetables: tomatoes, potatoes, greens and lettuces, onions, radishes, asparagus, broccoli, cucumbers, summer and winter squash, herbs, carrots, peas, beans, blackberries, raspberries, and rhubarb. I am attempting to grow blueberries in the Bluegrass

region's alkaline soil when they actually thrive in an acidic one. I still can and freeze as my mother taught me. And five years ago I started keeping bees to move toward a more complete backyard ecosystem.

When my brothers and sister and I sold our family home in 2002, the new owners mowed our gardens down. Fifty-year-old asparagus and blueberry bushes. The bramble berries and grapes. Row after row of strawberries. They even cut down the plum and apple trees. The last and only time I saw my homeplace, a huge lawn had replaced all we had built.

I think this destruction has made me a more determined gardener. I want to grow as much food as I can. I continue to grow organically and do not use genetically modified seeds. In a small way, I am saying no to corporate agriculture and food distribution. But gardening, for me, is something more than an expression of anticorporate politics. It is pleasurable—both the physical labor and the sweet taste of fresh food. And the older I get, the more I want to keep my parents close, to bring the best in them into my everyday life. In my mind, one of the most important ways in which we were connected as a family was through growing food, preserving it, and then cooking and eating it together.

How, I wondered, do other vegetable gardeners view their garden work? Are we swimming upstream against corporate agriculture? Is gardening a dying art? Why do people garden when they could buy their food at the grocery store, a food co-op, or a farmers' market? Why do all that heavy, hot work while depending on the vagaries of nature? And why do it, year after year, regardless of the state of the economy? Is gardening a form of resistance to the cultural and economic power of capitalized consumption? Does it reengage or maintain a cultural connection to the past? What forms of satisfaction or pleasure come from working the soil to grow food? Is there a spiritual dimension? What multiple meanings might be found in the act of growing food in our own backyards, creek bottoms, plots, and fields? These are the questions that pre-occupied me as I contemplated what we could learn about our history and culture if we listened to gardeners.

Kentucky is a rich place to gather the oral histories of gardeners. Writers such as Harriette Arnow and Wendell Berry have shown us how our communities, our stories, and our land are powerfully and irrevocably connected. We have stayed rural longer than some other places, managing somehow to maintain a few traditional agricultural practices. This lingering agrarian ethos is partly attributable to tobacco, a crop whose cultivation by the late twentieth century varied little (with the exception of the use of chemicals) from practices employed before World War II. Today few small farmers grow tobacco, once Kentucky's signature crop, in part because the federal government no longer subsidizes price supports in the form of poundage quotas and acreage allotments. But through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Tobacco Transition Payment Program, many former tobacco growers have used the "buyout" money to transition to other crops. Many of these family farmers moved quite successfully into vegetable production and now supply Kentucky's growing number of farmers' markets as well as their own tables. Still others quit farming altogether but maintained the tradition of a home vegetable garden.

Other historical forces have affected Kentucky's landscape. Parts of eastern and central Kentucky attracted a significant number of young people who as part of the back-to-the-land movement in the 1970s were interested—for survival's sake as well as for culture's sake—in learning how to live gently and simply without abusing the earth's resources. Kentuckians have cultivated these, at times, uneasy alliances in which traditional forms are taught to newcomers, who have reinvigorated and even reshaped the practices but, at the same time, kept them alive.

Immigration patterns and the local foods movement have also influenced the current gardening climate in Kentucky. In more recent years, Mexicans, Central Americans, Japanese, Vietnamese, and South Asians have become new Kentuckians. Some have cultivated their own beloved vegetables and introduced their gardening styles, while others, inspired by their new neighbors, have begun to grow food for the first time. The local foods movement has been firmly embraced by many Kentuckians. It

is a natural connection because “local” has long been revered in Kentucky. Kentuckians who have raised gardens and preserved food all their lives may not see themselves as part of a movement, but in fact the tenets of “local food” have always guided their lives. Consumers who shop at a community farmers’ market are also asserting that local food production, distribution, and consumption are the best sustainable practices for the economy and the environment. Using money from the 1998 tobacco company settlement, Kentucky’s Department of Agriculture built on this sensibility. In addition to assisting tobacco farmers’ transition to growing other crops, the department also provided valuable marketing by creating the “Kentucky Proud” brand for locally produced foods. These products can be found in farmers’ markets, at orchards and roadside stands, and even in supermarkets across the state. Sounding the “local foods” horn helps consumers be more conscious of Kentucky’s agricultural present and, I believe, subtly encourages home vegetable gardening and eating.

Kentucky’s cultural past and present make it an ideal place to explore how vegetable gardeners have interfaced with continuity and change. How and what we eat is part economy, part culture, part environment, and part biography. How we cultivate a garden and what we raise in it are also mediated by the same contingencies. Gardens, like people, may share a common terrain while wildly diverging from one another in form and content. The Kentucky gardeners profiled in *Row by Row* are an antidote to the tired old stereotypes about what kind of people make Kentucky their home and why. They reflect a diversity of gardening practices, traditions, innovations, and philosophies over the past one hundred years. Their gardens share a Kentucky backdrop, but their life stories have as many colors, shapes, and tastes as heirloom tomatoes do. This book is a meditation on how gardeners make sense of their lives through their gardens. Each profile illustrates how gardening shapes a life and, conversely, how a life shapes the garden.

In the fall of 2008, I began crisscrossing Kentucky interviewing home vegetable gardeners. After two and half years, I had completed over forty

recorded oral histories with gardeners from all parts of this region-conscious state. I talked with older and younger people and those in-between. I included those who have spent their lives in Kentucky and others, like myself, who are not native. Also represented in this book are gardeners who are varied in their gardening ways—those who garden in city and small town backyards, who carve out plots from their farmland, and who have sprawling gardens in creek bottoms and former pastures. One of the city gardeners, for instance, grew her vegetables in used five-gallon drywall mud buckets placed near her driveway. The gardeners varied in how they used their produce as well, with a few people both growing for home use and, periodically, selling at their local farmers' market.

I made a second visit to each gardener during the growing season, taking along photographer Deirdre Scaggs, who captured the gardeners in and around their gardens. After these sessions, we were often sent home with whatever was freshest in the garden, canned goods, and treasured seeds. Gardeners are generous.

Friends and acquaintances who do not necessarily share my passion for gardening supported this project with their enthusiasm and valuable help. They generously put me in contact with many of the vegetable gardeners whom I interviewed or with others who could provide an introduction to a gardener. Sometimes when I arranged an interview with one gardener, that person introduced me to another—a neighbor, a fellow seed saver, a colleague in Kentucky State University's Small Farmer Outreach Program.

I also interviewed a few gardeners who were my old friends. A co-worker at the University of Kentucky Libraries, where I worked as the curator of the Appalachian Collection for many years, wanted to be included. And after the *Lexington Herald Leader* published a story about my project, a woman e-mailed and asked me to interview her grandmother.

One winter Sunday I was interviewing Bev May in her Floyd County home after a lunch she had prepared with ingredients from her summer garden. She was a busy nurse practitioner with her own clinic in Hazard,

nearly an hour's commute one way. When I asked why she grew a garden, she answered me with a question: "If you have a piece of land, why wouldn't you have a garden?" This is what my father taught me when he gave me a garden plot, a bond between us all our lives even though we rarely saw eye to eye on much else. *Row by Row* is about people whose lives have come from many directions but meet in the garden. Whether they own two hundred acres or no land at all, together they seem to be echoing Bev's sentiment. Indeed, why wouldn't you raise a garden?

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