

Grieving in the Garden

FATHER-DAUGHTER BONDS TAKE MANY shapes. For me, gardening offers moments to reconnect with my dad. At 42, I became an orphan one Christmas Eve. The story is complicated, but the void in my heart is easy for any daughter to understand.

As I write, it's the spring following his death, and I find myself looking to the soil for answers. My dad and I shared a love for making things grow. As a child, gardening season started at the local feed mill. I'd watch Dad slowly count out the exact number of seeds he'd need and place them gently in a brown paper sack. When it was time, we'd plant the seeds in rows marked by twine. We'd round out our plantings with small tomato and cucumber plants from the local greenhouse. And then, we'd wait.

"Is it time?" I'd ask in earnest every day. "Nope. You must be patient." I'd see those initial white blossoms morph into tiny pea pods knowing that someday we'd pick our first super sugar snap pea. Green beans soon followed, with juicy cherry tomatoes, bi-colored sweet corn and bright red raspberries. Endless rows of cucumbers were soon ready to be canned in Mom's secret pickle recipe. Dad made it seem simple.

Years later, after my mother died, I tried to replicate that gardening magic at my first home. Without the loving eyes (and regular watering) of Dad, the plants died. I discovered that cheap soil, no fertilizer and an unfenced garden in an area heavily populated with deer spelled disaster. I moved several times over the next few years, and each move

marked a new opportunity to garden. But, something always got in the way. And when it did, Dad would share his bounty with me. As time went on, Dad's declining health limited his gardening—so I doubled down on mine.

I plotted my vision of the perfect garden. Every year involved more. My husband tried to keep up with my growing demands for raised beds, additional fencing, watering systems, fruit trees and perennials. We trucked in fresh manure. Despite being on a small lake lot, the project quickly became unmanageable. I planted what was easy and could grow no matter what.

After my son was born, my priorities shifted yet again. The balancing act of being mom, daughter, wife and professional caught up with me. Mint took over parts of the garden. Left untrimmed, my raspberry bushes spread wildly. Critters nibbled my asparagus to nubs, and my unfertilized lingonberries dried up.

I finally stopped trying to do too much. I scaled the gardens back to four 4-by-4-foot beds and a small plot of raspberries, sweet peas, sunflowers and mint. A few fruit trees remained and deer-resistant perennials surrounded an easily maintained rock garden. I fertilized and watered. Dad was an amputee then, and he gladly accepted my single, simple offering of sweet cherry tomatoes and a few sugar snap peas that I

snatched from my son's hands.

"You might get this gardening thing down, yet," he'd say, before giving a friendly suggestion on how to improve my outcomes. "You just need to be patient."

During his rapid decline, I knew we were out of summers. There would be no more garden banter about how to make things better. His parting words of "I'm proud of you and I love you" captured a lifetime of love in a single moment.

In the first days and weeks, I wondered how to mark his legacy. Do I plant a tree or an entire apple orchard? A garden statue? Planters? My dad loved blueberries. I thumbed through countless mail-order catalogs looking for the perfect tribute. I searched Pinterest. But each time I was overwhelmed with grief.

Spring arrived in the north woods. I found myself longing to solve this legacy question so I could check grief off my to-do list. Instead, bare ground looked back at me. I returned to the basics. Prep the soil. Fertilize it. Plant it with what you love. Water it. Nurture it. Each time, it gets a little easier.

Turns out, grief, like gardening, needs patience. 

//
You might get this gardening thing down, yet. You just need to be patient."



Beth Probst writes and gardens in northern Wisconsin. She blogs at circletouradventures.com.

