

PDX Garden Stories

Interviews with participants in Growing Gardens Home Gardens Program Portland, Oregon

Interview with Becca

Conducted by Brian Larsen, Joe Lopez, and Michael Miller

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Brian: Tell me about your history with gardening.

Becca: Well... I didn't garden at all growing up. I was kind of anti gardening. My mom always gardened but I never was out there helping her. She did a lot of flowers and a lot of herbs. Not too much edibles so we didn't have tomatoes or anything, but she was big on herbs so we always had herbs drying in the kitchen. So even though I didn't help, they were always around. It wasn't until I had a yard of my own that I wanted to start a garden of my own. I don't remember exactly how I came in contact with growing gardens but I worked for a non-profit so I probably crossed paths with them somewhere along the line and heard about their program and decided I wanted to give them a try. I had plenty of space at the place I was living at and decided I wanted to grow a garden.

Brian: And that was the house on

Becca: Terry Street, yeah... What I liked about the idea of "Growing Gardens" was that I didn't have any experience, I had a helping hand with Growing Gardens and that's what I needed because I didn't know what I was doing (2:00).

Brian: So let me ask you this... You really had no experience and were anti-gardening which I'll explore a little later on... So, not having experience before Growing Gardens, what was the connection? It was sunny, nice out, I'm going to go do it? Was it a healthy thing? I know you have a son....was it providing produce?

Becca: Yes, absolutely! So I guess he was never a very good vegetable eater so I thought if I got him involved in the process of growing then he might be more interested in trying the vegetables. It was something we could do together. He would be learning a skill, then the idea was if he was invested then he would eat and try new vegetables.

Brian: OK, so that makes sense, so there's a combination, you had a place, it sounded good, and there's a health benefit. Okay, so off that, how has creating your garden changed the way you eat or your diet itself for you and your family?

Becca: Well it's definitely made mealtime more exciting (3:22) to be able to go out and pick what we're going to have for dinner that night. Last year we had a lot of sweet peppers growing so we

would do, we would go, out and pick our sweet peppers and take them in and cook them up and have them for dinner and it was just easy and fun and fresh and engaging. So again there was that investment to eat what you had grown.

Brian: Absolutely, kids grow something they're going to eat it and that's very true. Coming back to that anti-gardening, so did you still have a pretty robust diet with vegetable growing up?

Becca: Yes, ishyyy, I mean we're Italian so we eat a lot of pasta....There's not a lot of vegetables, obviously you can dress it up put stuff in it but we eat a lot of meat and starches so our vegetables were stewed in the form of spaghetti sauce.

Brian: Okay, so how much of it was raw would you say, back in those days?

Becca: Ummmmmm, Raw? Never, we never ate salads, we never ate raw vegetables, Ummm, Sorry mom, she liked to steam them until they were mush and so what I know now is that we were or what I assume now is that we were cooking most of the nutrients out of them so even the vegetables we were eating we weren't getting what we needed from them.

Brian: So it sounds like your earlier relationship was kind of the accent to the starch and the meat. Along the way you get into gardening for all the right reasons, whatever that perfect storm that got you into gardening, essentially working with your son. How has that relationship with food changed now, as far as vegetables?

Becca: Well I'm definitely a lot more cognizant with what I feed my son. I'm constantly telling him to eat something from the earth (5:33). He loves macaroni and cheese and hotdogs and all the typical 9 year old boy kid foods. But I'm constantly reminding him to eat something from the earth. So I try to make carrot sticks and he loves cucumbers and apples. He loves fruit, berries, sweet raspberries, he loves raspberries and eats them....I would say till he's blue in the face but that's blueberries but he loves to eat fruit. Vegetables we're still working on but I try to give him raw or not cooked fresh vegetables.

Brian: So your other address which is Terry Steet, that was the original build for Community Gardens right? Obviously you're still in the building process of doing that here which is really nice by the way. When you were out at Terry you were growing a lot of vegetables right? So your community around there how did you involve the neighbors in the community in your garden or your growing methods? Tell me a little about that.

Becca: Well we had the garden mentor who was a neighbor and didn't live too far from us. So she would bike over and we did all of the plotting and planting, thinning and you know she taught me her tips and tricks that she used in her own garden and having somebody in the neighborhood was nice. It did give it that community feel. I also had a neighbor that lived two or three doors down from us that was an avid gardener so she would come over and we would talk about our gardens and get excited (7:20). And she would tell me what she was growing and I would tell her what I was growing and she'd offer tips and tricks and I would try to apply them.

Brian: So she was an extra help?

Becca: Yes.

Brian: Nice. So when Growing Gardens actually came out and did the build. What was that like?

Becca: That was huge because again, I needed the help. It was just me and my son who was around 4 at the time. He and I weren't going to be able to go out and turn over a bed at the time. Especially here in North Portland the soil is really rocky so we needed extra hands. So the fact that they had a crew of people, volunteers, they didn't have to pay for it, come out and turn over the garden, it was huge. We wouldn't have started gardening without them.

Brian: So them coming out and helping you build community within your little area and then you turned around and contributed to your community. I'd ask about the mentor piece but it sounds like your pretty well out of that now. Do you still stay in touch with your mentor?

Becca: We haven't been in touch since I moved into the new place.

Brian: How long have you been in your new place?

Becca: About a year and a half now.

Brian: Then you're off to a good start. So I'm all over the place because I'm kind of feeding off of what your saying so. I'd like to get your take on urban agriculture and home gardening.

Becca: Um...Every person that I know in my neighborhood has a garden of some sort. So everybody that I know is doing urban gardening (10:00), and urban gardening for food. There flowers and herbs that my mom used to grow but most people that I know are growing tomatoes and zucchini and eggplant and melons and things that are more sus-ta-nant than just herbs and flowers. I think it's huge, I think there's a ton of community building that happens and like you find things in common with people and you have conversations with people that you may not have had a chance to strike up a conversation with before that. You end up trading foods, trading "Hey I've got a surplus of zucchini" . "Great!" "Come take some of my tomatoes!" You know so there's a lot of trade that happens (11:25). Which is huge when you, so it's not just tips and tricks there's sharing of the fruits of your labor. And getting to do some food exchanges and help build the community in other ways.

Brian: So tell me more about your idea of community development. Connect community development and gardening.

Becca: Sure. It gives people something to talk about. It builds relationships and commonality and you know you're not going to be afraid the next time. For me a lot of this happens at the park when I'm there with my son. So I'm not going to be afraid next time to say "Hey remember last time when we were talking about our gardens last week?"

"Well this is what's going on now". Otherwise if I didn't have that common interest I might not go out of my way to reconnect with that person. If I hadn't connected with them over gardening I might not reconnect when I saw them again.

Brian: So the common thread value is like if we both like baseball we're going to have something to talk about. So that's not always easy to find. Community gardening is something everyone can do.

Becca: Like I said, everyone I know gardens. So it's something we all have in common. Especially this time of year, everyone is getting excited.

Brian: That's true. Is that true locally too? Are your neighbors around here?

Becca: Still getting to know my neighbors around here but in my broader, outside of the block community.

Brian: Tell me how you see your community gardening playing out? It's clear you have a passion for gardening and community. How does your gardening and your personality influence the neighborhood you're in now.

Becca: Well I think that a huge part of community development is just being available, so just being outside ...so...you know. So if I find myself to be outside with my neighbors who are also gardening then there's a perfect opportunity to and you have that common thing that you're doing. You could be doing it individually and isolated. You work in your space and I'll work in my space OR why don't we connect (14:20) Oh and by the way my name's Becca and what's your name and what's going on in your house. It's kind of an "in" to bigger conversation or it can be especially with your neighbors. It can be intimidating, we don't really live in the age anymore where somebody new moves on to the block and you go and bring them cookies or brownies or something so it's a matter of the timing. Being outside together at the same time and having something similar happening that you can discuss. My neighbor directly next door, he's got some landscaping going in so while it's not gardening in the sense that in the same way that I'm gardening it's still Oh, ya know, "what's going on in your yard?" "I see you've got these new plants in" "I see you pulled up all your grass, what are you planting?" "What's going on?"

Brian: So you're still working the earth? One way or the other....

Becca: Ya

Brian: So I'd like to hear more about the anti-gardening.

Becca: I didn't really mean anti, I mean I was a stubborn teenager. I didn't, I mean my mom was out mowing the lawn at 11:30 in the morning and I'm like why are you waking me up? I don't know that it was necessarily anti gardening, I mean it was just, you know, having different interests. I just wasn't interested at that time.

Brian: Where do you see the food system going? I mean you have it together as far as community development. How do you see the urban agricultural movement ties into community development, because it's everywhere?

Becca: It's a huge push. You see them everywhere. You've got your home gardens where people are gardening at home but you've also got community gardens that are available. I'm thinking there's one over on Interstate. I'm not sure of the name. There's another near McCoy park. They're everywhere so it gives folks who don't necessarily have the space to garden an opportunity to get out there and get their hands dirty and grow their own food in a communal

space where their connecting with the earth, connecting with their food, connecting with each other (17:20). I'm not sure if that answers your question.

Brian: Yes it does. If you could freely speak your mind about community gardens what would you like to say?

Becca: Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to ask questions, don't be afraid to look at websites, don't be afraid to do trial and error (18:40). Growing gardens is awesome because they have free workshops. Don't be afraid to go to workshops. Don't be afraid to go to free plant distribution day. I still go. I went this weekend even though I graduated 2 years ago. Just get out and get your hands dirty. There's something that my son and I were planting starts yesterday and he was really grumbling and didn't want to do it "I don't want to go out there. I wanna play the ipad!" I made him go out there and by the time we were planting our last he said he was sad because he wanted to plant some more things. He talks about having a garden of his own when he grows up. It just keeps going. It's not just plants. As a parent I'm planting ideas, skills, hobbies and interests that are outside. Leading to healthier choices (19:35)

Brian: Tell me more about your son.

Becca: He's just coming off of the growing program at school so we were able to put those in the ground. Ya know, he's been coming home with little plants and flowers for me since preschool but it wasn't until I actually got around to starting the garden that we ever got anything in the ground. This might be the first year that we ever got one of his starts from school actually into the ground. So, he's going to be a lot more invested. I feel proud that we were able to see that all the way through and we're now growing his plants.

Brian: Finally is there anything you would like to add?

Joe: Just out of curiosity can you tell us if you learned any gardening skills from your mother?

Becca: We never gardened together but she did teach me that you could feed your plants coffee and so last year when we were done making coffee we would dump our grinds into the garden. But other than that it was really Growing Gardens that and really my mentor, I mean I learned so much from her. One of the things that I learned from her that I taught my son yesterday was when you take the starts out of the little plastic pot is that you need to break up the roots. I never knew that before. I thought you just plopped it in the ground. She taught me that you have to break up the roots so.

Brian: What a different transformation as far as not being exposed to it and then pulling a 180 with your son. You can only imagine the impact this will have on him.

Becca: For me, I mean it really just allows me to clear my head. I mean yesterday I was really bogged down by stuff and gunk and so I knew as soon as I got out there and started working and doing something productive but relaxing it would help clear my mind. It gives you something to focus on so you're not focusing on whatever it's kind of a nice meditative break from real life. I love to come home at night and water and weed. It gives me a sense of accomplishment that I've taken care of something.

Joe: One more thing. Has growing your own garden changed the way you look at grocery store produce?

Becca: Ya. I go into the store and see how much things cost and I think “I can grow that” Why would I pay that when I know I can grow that at home and I know I’m not using pesticides. I know that everything is all organic that’s coming out of my garden. I know now what the difference in taste, when I’ve gone out and picked a pepper or tomato when I’ve picked it off the vine and eaten it right away versus going to the grocery store and gotten that. Yes, it has definitely impacted how I view produce in the grocery store.