

## **PDX Garden Stories**

### **Interviews with participants in Growing Gardens Home Gardens Program**

#### **Portland, Oregon**

#### **Interview with Rebecca**

Conducted by Cole Lalomia, 18 May 2015

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C- Tell us about your experience getting involved with gardening.

R- Becoming involved with gardening in general?

C- Yeah.

R-Well, I knew, growing up I knew people in my family that gardened, but it was pretty sporadic, it wasn't really every year doing a garden. And then [0:22] when I was in my early twenties I sort of got interested in herbs, and was doing herbs and potted plants back in Baltimore, when I lived in the city. And then when I moved out here, um, I started really wanting to grow food, and eat really good food. I worked in the restaurant industry, and I thought, "Well, if I'm going to work in the industry, I should know a little bit more about where the food is coming from." And so I gardened sporadically until about, um, six or seven years ago I started becoming really more interested in gardening, and kept going and not really knowing what I was doing. And so my first couple of big gardens were awesome. They were beautiful, and it was totally beginner's luck – it was because the person who gardened before me was really good to the soil, and so I benefited from that. And then the third year was like, it tanked. It was awful, nothing really thrived, and I couldn't figure out why. That was a rough year, trying to figure stuff like that out, and then I kind of was like, oh, well maybe I have to be nicer to the soil, and put nutrients back in. [1:33]Um, I started reading books and things like that, and uh, started getting better at some things, and not at others. It just – the more you know, the more you realize you don't know, and then you have to learn more, and all that. So that was how I really got into it.

C- How, how long ago was that? How long ago was that slump year?

R- The slump was like, I would say my worst garden was about six years ago, it was really bad. And then I had one bad year here, and it was in the back yard, where I used to have the garden space, um, and it was just because I didn't amend the soil enough. Now I know. Now I'm always just like, you know...

C- So growing up, what was your experience with food, and gardening? Um, I know you mentioned working in the food industry a little bit,

R- Yeah.

C- Um, and gardening sporadically a bit...

R- Yeah, my natural mother had a garden sometimes, and it was mostly like broccoli and tomatoes. And tomatoes – everyone grows tomatoes. And, uh, and I grew up in Virginia, so it's really hot, hot summers. And so things like tomatoes and peppers grow really well there. [2:54]And so I remember eating tomatoes and thinking, gosh tomatoes are *so* good, you know, so I was spoiled in that respect. And then my dad and step mom had a small garden, but it wasn't like a focal point for anybody, really. Um, and my natural mother couldn't cook, she was a terrible cook, um, things were canned, or boxed, except in the summer, when we either had a garden or farmer's market. [3:18]So other than that, it was really bad. And then when I moved in with my dad when I was a teenager, it was much better food.

And then I became a vegetarian, the wrong way, which is I knew *nothing* about what to eat, except for not eating meat. [3:36] Um, so it wasn't until I moved out here, and was working in restaurants out here where food took a stronger role, and learned more about food, and things like that. [3:48] And so being out here, especially in this sort of area, with a philosophy on land and food being different than it is on the East coast, I think- some- well, generally, then it became important for me to really grow. And now, it's really important.

C- Cool. How long have you been in Portland for?

R- 15 years.

C- Alright. What were your experiences with gardening, like leading up to your involvement with Growing Gardens?

R- Um, I was learning more, certainly, and doing a lot of reading, and um, trying to find anybody who could answer questions about gardening. And [4:30] a lot of my friends who garden, um, they do a lot of landscaping and floral work, not a lot of vegetable gardening. And I found that even though we were sharing information, and the friends that did do vegetables, they didn't really know much more than I knew, and also, you know, I'm a single parent, and so my budget is really tight. And I knew that there were ways I could amend my own soil, and ways that I could grow things that I just didn't [5:00] know how to do. You can read something, and then you can learn from somebody showing you something, and sometimes what you get from that is really different. [5:09] And so when Sy was in kindergarten, up at Lents, we got the flier for Growing Gardens, and I thought, I'm gonna do it, you know, because it'll – I'll be able to talk to people who have been gardening far longer than I have: so much more information, and really benefit from being in the community, where you can talk to someone. And that'll be really beneficial. So that's how I ended up getting involved with Growing Gardens. And that was three years ago, and this'll be the third year.

C- Cool. And so, what has Growing Gardens, um, actually done? Did they come in here and help you build the garden in front yard? Or...

R- Yes. So I had already a bit of a garden in the front yard, but um, it was- and I had gotten some soil and some really good compost and stuff like that a couple of years prior so that was really helpful but it was time for me to learn more about digging up my own beds and adding stuff back into the soil. So they first came out and tested the soil for lead. Because this house is a hundred some odd years old. And so they wanted to make sure that I wasn't growing food with lead in it from the soil—which I wasn't so that's good. So they tested that, and then they came they said okay were gonna, you know, the front yard is great because it gets sun all day long, which is wonderful. They built two beds over here and we talked a lot when they came and a bunch of volunteers come and you hangout and you talk to everyone and it's really nice to be a part of that kind of community and really learned about how to create a bed and why you put certain things in the soil and what it does. So that was really helpful. And since then, there's always somebody to call and ask questions and they're really good about making sure you have seeds and making sure you know when to plant things and making sure you get as much information as possible and they let you know about all the different types of workshops and groups going on in town, whether it's like a donation, or free, or whether it's through school or things like that. And sometimes when you're just gardening and you're not really part of a group or a community you don't—it's really hard to find that information.

C: And you've been involved with GG for three years?

R: this will be the third year, yeah. And this year I'm mentoring.

C: Awesome, so now, you know, you're taking on roles within the organization as well...

R: Yeah!

C: How has gardening affected your life?

R: You know, in a lot of different ways. And it's been over the last year probably that started to

recognize how much it affects our life in a positive manner. [8:09] You know, there's just the simple act of physically doing something, and gardening takes a lot of energy and effort, and a lot of strength and time. So it's physical activity, it gets you outside, and it's meditative. You've got all this stuff to do that's repetitive like weeding and hoeing and planting, you have to really think and be methodical and in-tune with what's going on. It helps you be in-tune with the world around you, especially the natural world and understanding what's safe, and what isn't. You start to absorb a little bit of knowledge of the ecological system that you're in just by being out and doing things. You get to see what's healthy and what's not. Organic gardening is important especially because you're really feeding the garden and the earth and the animals that are beneficial and that help you keep negative things out of your garden. And then just being able to eat, and then make your own food. You grow it and you tend it and what you get back is just this bounty, and then sharing it with all your friends and your family is also extra special. And I think in today's climate with agro-chemical companies who are taking over what our general population sees as decent food. I think growing your own food is kind of subversive. And I think it's important. People are recognizing that it's important for your own food independence. They're learning that supporting small farms and organic farming and going back to ways that things might have been before like in our grandparents' generation, is probably better than what's going on now. Knowing what you're eating, and knowing where it comes from and how valuable that is and being able to do that for yourself—it's important. [10:14]

C: How do you feel when you're gardening?

R: Well, most of the time I feel pretty good. I can look at it, I did some this weekend because we got some new plants and stuff and planted all the things that we can plant right now, so every time I look at my garden I'm like yeeeeee this is so cool, you know and it looks pretty and it's exciting and you really get emotionally connected to the garden. So it feels great. There are some times when I'm just like uhhh I really don't wanna weed but you have to. And then by the time you're like oh I accomplished something. It's really immediate gratification that you get. Unless you plant some seeds and every day, you go look, and you know they're not gonna sprout yet but you still want to look! You know, like "have they come up?" But it's nice. You grow a little bit, and then you grow a little bit more, and you grow a little bit more and then you go "my garden's too small! I need more space. How can I add more space to my garden?" And then you collect pots and collect more pots and you grow more things that you might not have grown before and it feels really awesome. [11:29] I love pulling up to my house after working or picking up Siloh from school and pulling up and being like "gasp. I love my garden!" You know, it's like the first thing I see when I pull up so that's really cool. Yeah it feels really good. [11:47]

C: Yeah, it's something to be proud of for sure.

R: [12:00] Really proud of, yeah! and I've been doing it long enough now that I've gained some information and my friends come over and say, "Okay I need some help" and yeah I have the answer and gives you a sense of pride like, "look what I can do!" and I can feed us. Its really cool.

C- And especially after doing it for six years now and you learn a lot

R- Yeah

C- I can imagine. In what ways if any has it affected how you eat personally, or your kids?

R- Well you know always I thought it was important for him to eat really wholesome foods and we eat not everything from scratch, um, so most of the time everything is cooked. We have some packaged foods, it's just easier for lunches and things like that for kids but we do a lot of from scratch cooking pretty much every day from home and on the weekends, it's pretty much always been that way. Pretty much [13:02] 6 to nine months out of the year the majority of our food comes out of our garden and then this year was the first year that I canned enough and preserved enough foods and with that it's almost gone. And now we are heading into the season, you know, the early season of gardening and it's

pretty cool to eat stuff that I planted and grew still. And, a lot of the food that we eat its more seasonal and I try to focus on that a little bit more, and it's really good and simple, you know, really letting the food shine, you know, radishes are radishes and artichokes are artichokes, you know, really extenuating the freshness of what that is and not over complicating the food I think is what we've really learned a lot- really fresh and simple ways to eat. [14:01]Not that there is anything wrong with fancy French cooking but sometimes you just...

C- A little bit of salt will go a long way.

R- Yeah, right? Right on your tomatoes.

C- Yeah.

R- So good.

C- Totally. In what ways if any has gardening affected your relationship to food, or how you think or feel about food, since you started gardening?

R- Yeah. Really have.[14:27] I don't think a couple years ago I would have paid \*as much\* attention to the ingredients in the food we buy, we try to buy really good foods, but I don't think that I would have probably been as incensed by things like Monsanto or pesticides, so I think that my relationship to food is more intelligent and pickier. I think now I think about food as a way to make a statement- a political statement also. To kind of stick it to the man you know. It sounds so silly but that's whole I feel. I feel that the way our food is being treated now is a symptom of what's going on in politics now, I think that taking back that control, even though it's on my little garden it's my way of saying you don't get to put that in my body without my permission. So yeah.[15:40]

C- Are there any other impacts that growing your own food has made that you'd like to describe?

R- Well, I get to share stuff with my neighbors, you know, I live on a nice little street, and all my neighbors are really nice, and sometimes it's fun to show up at everybody's house and say here, I've got an overabundance and getting to do that with my friends and people I work with and bringing in something and having everybody's eyes go "ooh what did you bring in?" and that's kind of nice. And my son likes to go in the garden sometimes. And you know he mostly wants to play basketball right now but he will come in and do some weeding or do some planting and then my friends kids go well we want to do some planting too, and they take a sense of ownership of that and I think that's really lovely when you're really little and someone in your life is an avid gardener they start to want to participate in that and growing and eating it. And [16:46]one thing that I found that I didn't expect was if we plant it, if Sy and I decide let's get all these plants, he'll eat it. If we go to the store and we get a rutabaga, kids are like uhhh I don't know, but if your like here this is the rutabaga we planted, they're like, "yeeaahh lets eat it!" You know, it's a really different sense of desire to eat and I think that for him he'll grow up with this really strong idea of what food is and how to feed himself and how to feed his community and I'm hoping that that translates into other ways for him that will be really positive.[17:29] So yeah. That was some unexpected awesome things that came out of it.