

PDX Garden Stories

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

Interview with Shireen

Conducted by Jessica Clarson

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[Talking about setting up the recording device]

0:45

J- Our first question is what role did gardening play in your life prior to getting involved with growing gardens?

0:52

S- None, whatsoever. I had never gardened. My mother --- my parents didn't garden, specifically my mother, so I really had no experience gardening my whole adult life other than maybe some tomatoes in a two by four plot in an apartment.

1:16

J- So how did you get involved with growing gardens? What was the ---

1:22

S- I ended up in the house with the garden in the back yard that you saw. That was an old established garden. Actually, it was 50 years old and needed a lot of --- I mean it's old. It's eclectic and old like myself, but it needed a lot of work and I knew I was in over my head because I didn't know anything about gardening. Period.

1:45

J- So, did you just research to find an organization?

1:49

S- I think I saw a flyer in whole foods for growing gardens. I thought it would be a good idea. It was free so that was attractive for someone being retired and on a minimal to no budget. And, I went to their orientation and thought it would be a good fit, that I could learn a lot and that would be a lot of fun. And, I could grow vegetables and/or whatever in my--- as you see--- in the garden in the back.

2:22

J- So how long ago was that?

2:25

S- That was three years ago.

2:30

J- Okay. So you just finished their program right? Or is this the last summer?

2:35

S- I think I'm at the end of the --- I was a mentee the first year. And then I continued in the program but volunteered to be a mentor. So, that was fun. Then I decided I wanted to learn more so in addition to working with Growing Gardens I signed up for a program through Oregon State [University] called Seed to Supper through Oregon Food Bank. So then I was simultaneously being a mentor, still involved with Growing Gardens, but continuing to learn more about gardening.

3:24

And then, after I completed the Oregon State Seed to Supper, the director--- she wasn't the director. What was her title? She was... the facilitator, of our group, suggested I take Oregon State's master garden program. And so I just completed that. So now I'm officially an Oregon State master gardener and can answer the phone lines through Multnomah County: questions when people don't know how to identify...[laughter]

4:06

However. However, I've come to learn, through other master gardeners, that we don't always know anything. That we learn how to research and find out some information even though we've successfully taken the test. Nobody knows everything and I was told not to be so hard on myself. That I don't remember every plant... insect... or --- anyway. They said that you're going to continuously learn and it's a journey. So I'm on that journey.

4:54

J- What are you planning on growing this season? And do have plans for what you'll cook with it? Do you save your produce? Do you jar?

5:05

S- I cook with the produce, as you see growing. Collard greens, those are actually the collard greens I had from last year. And collard greens, as long as you keep cutting them, you can continue to harvest them. There's a nice pot out there. You can't let them bolt; you have to trim them. And right now, mine need to be trimmed, cooked and I will plant a new crop by the end of this month.

5:38

So, right now I'm just preparing my boxes, my planter boxes in the ground, and getting ready for this year's vegetables. And I'll probably grow again: tomatoes, onions, leeks, arugula, chard, collard greens. There's a patch of garlic that's already started so it's going. So garlic.

6:09

I have herb boxes so probably three or four types of sage, parsley, basil, cilantro... what else is out there... oh, I have rosemary. I have a huge--- I inherited, probably a 20 to 30 year old rosemary bush. So when I cook, I just go outside and trim things and in the pot they go. And the flavors and smells of whatever you're cooking, when it's coming out of your garden they're wonderful.

6:50

It really enhances --- people think I'm just a marvelous chef and a lot of the time it's just that I know what seasonings and what herbs to put in something. And you can make the simplest of things taste like you've gone to the finest restaurants. So it just makes it fun and exciting. I'd much rather go --- if anyone's ever gone, or if you've gone, to look at the cost of herbs at whole foods, or wherever you might buy fresh herbs, it's a lot nicer to go out and just trim them out of your boxes as opposed to paying three or four dollars for a little bundle of something fresh.

7:40

J- The crops you have yet to plant, that's all of the onions and the leeks? Do you have to replant your collard greens?

7:49

S- The collard greens, as long as they're growing and the flavor is there, I'll continue to grow what you saw. I eat collard greens, I like collard greens. So I will be thinning out what's there. Cooking what's there. As long as it's growing and looks healthy, I'll continue to eat what's in the box but I definitely will be planting more.

8:18

J- Since the garden was installed, how else has Growing Gardens helped you? And have you taken classes with them?

8:23

S- I've taken all the classes that they offered. Part of why I ended up with Seed to Supper. Because, at that point, I had taken everything Growing Gardens had to offer. And, [I had] volunteered for them. Part of my master gardening responsibilities, because I owe Master Gardener's fifty-six hours, I'm volunteering ---

9:00

I'll continue to volunteer through growing gardens

J- okay.

S- I'd do it anyway. so It was kind of a no brainer. I'd have volunteered whether I was required to or not.

J- Gotcha

S- But since they're part of --- there's a list of things you can do, and growing gardens was on the list. So i thought oh well this is easy; okay hi! Its Shireen I will continue to volunteer for you and I will have a ment... --- actually I have two mentees.

J- okay.

S- But getting a hold of them, that's a whole other matter for younger people like yourself, but sometimes they get busy, but I'm there if they need me.

J- Okay, So --- can contact you if they have any questions?

9:48-

S- I called them to touch base I'm encouraging them and reminding them that growing gardens, that they had the plant give away not this saturday but the following Saturday, so I'm going to call and remind them. And I suspect that after they get their plants they're going to want more help. I've encouraged them to do things like weed and prepare their soil, amend the soil and get the ground ready to receive their plants and or seeds.

J- Okay

S- And that's about all I can do, and they have my phone number if they have questions they can call me.

J- And are your mentees, are they from the home gardens section?

S- They signed up with growing gardens. So growing gardens always assigns a mentor to a mentee. I had a mentor my first year. Actually the director was my mentor, but then Rodney passed away.

10:56

So I felt blessed that I had the person that was really responsible for growing gardens worked directly with me, I learned a lot from him. And modeled what he did with me, or tried to model what he did with me to whoever I taught to. I didn't have near the knowledge, he had a degree and his expertise was plants, so it made me want to know more. Because I started at like zero. Like okay, here's some tomatoes and that's about all I knew what to do, was grow a tomato. And he was instrumental in peaking my interest, encouraging me to go to additional classes and again take the seed to supper you know. It was kind of, oh, well if you want to continue learning we've taught you, what we're going to teach you through growing gardens, and if you want to know more then... they gave me a way to approach how to learn more, and that was through the Oregon state program.

12:02

I could show you the book and you could really appreciate before you leave. it's like this thick. (gestures with hand)

J- Oh my gosh!

S- And the test passed oregon state's master garden program, and it took me over 3 and a half hours to take the test. It made me realize how much I do not know about entomology and biology. It's a rigorous program, a lot of information. And I will continue to study the book just to retain what was made available in the class.

J- Does it have all that information on --- entomology and biology in addition to the plant based knowledge too.

13:00

S- Hit pause. I got some pictures here...

J- So our final question is what excited you the most about this program, and has gardening made a difference in your life and what's your favorite aspect of gardening.

13:49

S- learning that I could eat, and better my health because I have fibromyalgia, and I've gained a lot of weight , and if i eat a plant based diet that's a better choice for me. I'll be healthier. I've gained 10 pounds every year since I've retired. So to get back to a place that's comfortable for me, I can grow my vegetables, save money, be healthier, eat healthier, learning about the plants and the herbs, and things that they do for the body. What was the other part of the question again?

14:30

J- So the second part was has gardening made a difference in your life.

S- Now that the weathers getting nicer I usually have probably a tank top and half of nothing on, and I sit there, and I get vitamin d, just the sun. The sun that is instrumental in making the plants grow makes my skin and me feel better. You know, just getting some sun shine. And that interactive activity, like there humming birds out there, there's butterflies, there's
15:00- pollinators and bee's. And cats, I have one cat contrary to what my neighbors think. I have one cat, but all the cats in the neighborhood like my back (yard) so they go hang out and they'll chill and lay around and jump at squirrels and jump at butterflies. And it's really just neat for me to maybe just have a book, or just to relax, or have peace of mind with whatever else is going on in the world. I just open my little screen door and go outside and sit back there and chill and I'm like just as happy as you know... okay this works for me! I don't need my itty bitty cracker box. It's just big enough for me. I go out there in my little backyard when the grass is not up to my knees. (laughter) And I get Kenny back there to mow it for me. Other than that it keeps me in a 15:58- happy place, and a connectedness to god because I feel like I'm channelling my inner mother earth. I want to be a good steward with what I've been blessed with. So i get excited and happy about the flowers. And there's a family of blue birds that live in the tree there. There's like a couple, five families of different humming birds and they all come down to the feeder. The squirrels run back and forth, it's just like a little happy paradise. And that's so like, I feel like okay!

16:36

J- Haha

S- You're doing your part. I have peanuts you know. Oh it's winter time you don't have enough food. Oh heres some peanuts everybody. They come tell me good morning.

J- Thats lovely. And then the last part was what was your favorite aspect of gardening.

S- Just, what I just said.

J- Yeah you just touched on that so perfect. Thank you so much for your time!

S- You're welcome!

17:05