

PDX Garden Stories

Interviews with participants in Growing Gardens Home Gardens Program

Portland, Oregon

Interview with Susan

Conducted by Cole Lalomia & Lu Whipps, 3 May 2015

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C- Alright, can you tell us about your experience just getting involved in gardening from the very beginning, whenever your first experience with gardening was?

S- My first experience with gardening was when we had three young children, and put a huge garden in the way back, and we would try all types of things to grow, from always lettuce, corn, back then bush beans, now I do pole beans, um, tried watermelons and cantaloupes. That was all row, you know, just line up each row and how many apart, all that. I don't do row by row anymore.

C-Yeah. And how long ago was that?

S- Well, my youngest is 33, and we've been here 37 years.

C- What was your interest in getting into gardening? Just to grow your own food, or feed your kids?

S- Feed the kids!

C- Yeah. Was growing food ever around your family growing up?

S- No.

C-No?

S- No, no. I grew up in the inner city, in the 50s and 60s, and you know, with parents that were depression kids, and so in the 50s and 60s, those parents that had gone through the depression and had to grow their own food, and then got these good paying jobs said, you know, everything in the grocery store, everything in the industry, just crazy...

C- Yeah, it makes a lot of sense for the parents who had to do that to see grocery stores filled with food and think "I'm not going to go back to doing that"

S- [2:30] Yeah, prosperity meant that you could go to the grocery store, that you could... you know, we had friends that owned a meat market...

C- What were your experiences with gardening leading up to Growing Gardens? I know you were mentioning you had the garden in the back before.

S- We had the garden in the back, but the kids grew up and we got involved in a lot of music, we were traveling, and we weren't home during the summers, so we quit gardening. Well part of it too is putting in a pool in the back yard. So we quit gardening, and that one little stretch [in the front yard] is where we would plant some things. So we would always have pumpkins, and we tried tomatoes in different containers and found out not out there because the dog thinks green tomatoes are balls. So we really weren't gardening a lot. My next door neighbor was really into gardening, she hasn't done much in her boxes this year... and so every once in a while I'd come home and find a new plant out there, like "I have too many zucchini plants, so here, you got some" or, "here's a crook-neck" or something. So, when I got the information for Growing Gardens I was really excited, because we'd be able to get two beds. But when they came out and looked, they went, "we can't just bring you soil, we have to do something else here."

C- Right, because it was all gravel.

S- It's *all* gravel.

C- Gotcha. And what was your experience getting involved with Growing Gardens like?

S- It's been really... I've found the people at Growing Gardens to be really helpful. [...] I have found that anytime they have workshops and I call up and say "I'm one of your gardeners," they go "you're in!"

C- That's great. So, they helped put in the garden beds... and how long ago was it that they put in the garden beds?

S- This is my third summer. So two years; I'm considered a third year gardener.

C- After that point, you don't lose connection with them, right?

S- No. So they do seeds, where you can get seeds, at least through the third year, I'm not sure what's gonna happen next year. So you get seeds, and every year I say I'll deliver, so I always go down to the office and I get seeds for a certain area out here to deliver, along with getting our own. They have the plant distribution day, which was last weekend. The first year we did it, the plants were brought to a central area for the cohort. Last year I was busy, so he [her husband] picked them up; this year I said, "I'll just come down and volunteer!" So, I got to be the first one to go through and get plants!

C- Is that where you got those blueberry plants?

S- No, the blueberry plants I bought at Tony's. Tony's is... out here in East Portland, and he has two other stores. Tony's has two coupons in the Chinook Book, so you know, I got some blueberries.

C- How has gardening affected your life? It's a big question, but...

S- Well, when the children were little, it was a chore to keep on top of it. As I said, we did it by row, so it was more weeding, you know, looking for a way to make sure we watered correctly, keeping the animals out of it and the children, trying to get the children involved in it, so it wasn't as pleasant. But last Sunday, after I got my plants, I think she [the dog] and I spent from about 10:00 'til 5:00 out there. Taking breaks, cause I gotta make her come in to drink water. Taking breaks, but I'm like, [8:00] I'm the only one out there, no one else is out there in my whole neighborhood! Nobody else is out there, and I'm like, "I've been out here all day, planting!" And because I've decided to take risks, just throwing seeds out there, I think it's become more fun- "Look at what I found!" I didn't do so much by seeds years ago, it was having to go to Fred Meyer, which was about the only place, and having to buy plants, and hope they made it, and nobody knowledgeable to help you. So in 30 years, things have turned around, and there's so many new people into gardening.

C- Yeah, it's definitely come a long way. Now, how much of... it sounds like a lot of the food that you're growing and have grown a lot in the back for the kids; how much of what you were cooking do you think was coming from the garden at that time?

S- If it wasn't coming from the garden, it was coming from u-picks, cause we went out to u-picks also, for blueberries, well for berries, mainly. So, for the fresh, a lot of fresh. But I would go out and harvest pears at my friend's, so I would can pears, I would can peaches. That's the other thing, I remember just very hot summers of being canning and canning and canning! And then when they got older, I went, "I'm done canning!"

C- It's a lot of work!

S- But this summer I want to get back into canning!

C- Now that they're gone, right?

S- Well see, this is what my mother did, [10:00] she moved out to Charbonneau when my kids were little, and we would go out to all the orchards, and she would do canning, and I'd do canning. But not.. what I'm excited about is Zenger farm, the grange will be opening, and they've got a commercial kitchen, and they're gonna make it open to people for if they want to come in and do canning. So I don't have to do my canning in this hot little house!

C- That's great! That makes it a lot easier, to have the space to do it. That's cool. Um, how would you say... or, in what ways, if any, has growing food affected your diet? How has growing food and knowing how it's produced, maybe, affected the way you eat?

S- Well, I know that the food I'm eating during the summer and fall is all organic; I don't know that so much after that is organic, because we have a store that we shop at that has reduced produce – it's really stretched our budget. We also will shop at Safeway for meat, when it's half off, and you know, I would hope that when it says "Rancher's Reserve" that it's a little bit more organic, but you know, sometimes...

C- It's tough to tell by the label.

S- Yeah.

C- In what ways has growing food affected your relationship to food? Like, how you think about food, how has that changed?

S- I don't think it's really changed. I've always been, well as an adult, not a child, into salads, and eating fresh foods. So that hasn't changed. When my kids were little, I cooked everything from scratch.

C- Right. Did it ever change... there was a time before you were gardening, right? So before you started the garden in the back yard, how did you think about food, and I guess did you view food any differently before you started gardening?

S- Yeah. Yeah, you know, I thought green beans and corn came out of cans, and he [her husband] thought those were the only two vegetables in the world! So I mean, his diet has changed dramatically, more than mine. Because I had a mother that loved to experiment, and loved to cook a lot of food. But still, we weren't eating fresh green beans. Or, we'd eat fresh corn on the cob, but she wasn't taking the corn off the cob, or any of that. Whereas he grew up in a family that didn't eat quite like how I ate.

C- What are any other impacts that growing food has had on your life, if you can think of any? How has having a garden influenced your life?

S- Well, I have a freezer that has tomatoes, and frozen pureed pumpkin in it – which I keep forgetting about, so on the weekends I'm like, “what's in here? Oh yeah, I've got plum sauce! What can I do with that?” So, it's, you know, that's why I said I've gotta get back into canning, cause I froze everything, cause that was the easy thing to do. “Oh, I have some basil I made back here, what can I do with that?” That reminds me, I've got green sauce, I've gotta go pull that out! That's the problem, it's all out in this freezer in the other room, so I keep forgetting about it. [15:00] So, knowing that I do have food, I'm trying to change my mentality to eat up the food I have before getting more food. I'm trying to say – well I don't eat McDonald's, but passing a McDonald's billboard, looking up at the avocado going, “oh, I wish I had avocados!” But it's okay I don't. That's not something I have to have today.

C- How does it to feel know you'll definitely have food from the garden?

S- Oh it [15:52] feels good, like we've got a huge salad in there, and I'm like, “will you dig in and eat the salad? ~quit eating chips and salsa! Eat the salad!~”

C- It sounds like you've been growing food you've been eating, and that it helps. It sounds secure.

S- When we started this, I luckily hooked up with Zenger farms, because there were some foods that, like kale, I'd only ever had kale in kale salad, and I didn't really like it, so I learned how to cook kale. I'd never cooked eggplant before, and I found out that I like eggplant.

C- Done the right way, yeah.

S- Well, ratatouille's good! That's a good way to use up the squash, zucchini, eggplant, tomatoes; it's a good fall meal.

L-So that was when you were first starting gardening?

S- This one. Because before, I was growing the things I knew, you know? Lettuce. Radishes.

C- So now you're experimenting a bit.

S- Yeah. Now we're branching out, trying new foods we've never had before.

C- That's great, cool! Well I think that's all we got, it's been great talking to you. [17:52]