

Strawberries

By Dennis Knight

The only thing predictable about the growing season on the Laramie Plains is it will be short. The altitude makes summers cool and pleasant, but bookended by deep frosts late in the spring and early in the fall. Wyomingites are not easily denied, though, even by the elements. Dirt is dirt, and twelve weeks ought to be plenty of time to raise a cucumber or squash, maybe even a tomato.

The availability of bedding plants and chemicals might make gardening in Laramie a practical venture today, but sixty years ago you started with seed and fertilizer (the real stuff). Despite the odds, with seven kids grazing, it made good sense for Mom and Dad to try to raise at least a few things to eat. So, along about Memorial Day, when he was sure the last spring frost was indeed the last, Dad grabbed a couple of us boys to help him turn the soil in what he optimistically called “the garden”.

When the bed was plowed, raked, cleaned of rocks, and ready, Mom brought out the seed packets -- carrots, radishes, green onions, leaf lettuce, beets, spinach – you know, the junk grownups like. By evening, the crops were planted. The seed envelopes were mounted on sticks at the head of the rows to announce what was forthcoming, but this was the Laramie Plains and in a day or two the signage was scattered afar in the Wyoming winds. No matter, you don’t need a sign to know a rutabaga.

On the Fourth of July, when America’s real farmers stood in knee high corn, the Knight’s sparse garden was showing the lacy leaves of carrots, a healthy row of radishes, and green onions. The carrots and onions were disappearing because of jackrabbits, or possibly a sneaky brother, so they were taken early to garnish a family salad. Ultimately, the September harvest brought us only radishes, but plenty of them. We ate them at lunch and dinner for weeks, and none of us had the courage to complain.

I note these facts not to disparage Laramie or my parents as tillers of the soil, but to create a backdrop when I tell about the day my dad planted the strawberries.

Dad came home from work on the railroad one June morning, and talked about how Mr. Joy, his engineer on that trip, had bragged about his strawberry patch. The fact of growing strawberries in Laramie was noteworthy indeed, but the amazing part was the plants were shooting off runners, making new strawberry plants, and creating a general congestion in his garden.

Mr. Joy proposed a plan to alleviate this strawberry jam (pun confessed). Dad and some of his pals would each take some of the runners and plant them in their own yards. So Dad gathered his friends, Lawrence and Oren, and off to Mr. Joy’s they went. They selectively and neatly removed 96 plants, and Mr. Joy was so pleased he invited the men into the kitchen for a little belt. Well, a general discussion of agronomy in the high plains ensued and another round or two was poured, then the three new farmers went on to Oren’s to plant his berries, leaving Mr. Joy behind to admire his.

Oren already had a spot prepared. They placed 32 plants neatly in the bed, and he was pleased, so he invited Lawrence and Dad in for a drink in celebration. After further discussion of Western agriculture led to debate on United States farm policy, they had another one or two, and Dad took Lawrence home to plant his strawberries, leaving Oren behind to admire his.

It was a simple matter to plant 32 more strawberries, although neatness no longer counted, and Lawrence was pleased, inviting Dad in for a wee nip from his bottle. They discussed the new Republican administration, and specifically the agriculture secretary, Ezra Taft Benson, and other such bull fertilizer. Lawrence poured another, before Dad decided he must get home before dark to plant his strawberries, leaving Lawrence behind to admire his.

The sun was only a dim memory that evening when, alone, Dad planted his strawberries, in the little patch which had been carefully tilled. The next morning the sun was stark, raving reality when Mom went to the back yard to inspect Dad's work, and found sticking out of the ground, the roots of thirty two strawberry plants, each planted neatly, but upside down.

We didn't have strawberries that year, and I believe that was the last time our family ever attempted to cultivate edible plants. Mom changed her ambitions from leaf lettuce to snapdragons and from turnips to tulips. We all lived happily ever after, as did our local green grocer.