

FIRST PERSON

## THE SELFISH GARDENER

Growing your family's food may be trendy, but *Virginia Sole-Smith* digs into the dirt to feed her own soul.



# W

**E WERE ABOUT A MONTH** into the pandemic when I told my husband, Dan: We need raised beds. It was an idea we'd been kicking around ever since 2016, when we moved into this

house on three acres of woods and meadow in New York's Hudson Valley. That first spring, I pictured a Pinterest-worthy vegetable garden on the sunny side of the garage. But I was pregnant and writing a book at the time, so like many Pinterest visions, it was a project firmly filed under "Eventually." But then came 2020. We spent March and April trapped in our house with two kids, no school, and daily headlines about grocery shortages, and suddenly a vegetable garden seemed not just picturesque but indispensable. When Dan called the lumber yard to order boards for raised beds, the guy laughed. "You and everyone else!" But he loaded up our cedar boards, Dan built the beds, and I planted them full of kale, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and eggplant. And then I remembered: I love to garden, but I don't really like to grow food.

This is an unpopular opinion among gardeners, because there is a lot of reverence right now around the rituals of growing your own food. Sun-ripened tomatoes taste best straight off the vine. Locally grown food, people say, is healthier for us and more sustainable for the planet. They may be right about the environmental benefits. But they talk much less about the amount of free labor—traditionally performed by women—that goes into growing a garden to feed a family of four. It's not just tilling, planting, weeding, and watering. It's also battling deer, groundhogs, and bunnies. It's maintaining constant vigilance over berry bushes so you beat the birds to the fruit. And then it's spending hours in a hot August kitchen, pickling, canning, and preserving your harvest.

I've been stuck in that hot kitchen before. A decade ago, at our previous house, as an overeager first-time homeowner and gardener, I planted dozens of tiny seedlings in three small beds—not understanding how big the plants would get, or that cucumbers don't fruit when their vines have nowhere to ramble but zucchini almost always fruit so prolifically that you will be oppressed by a mountain of green baseball bats you can't even *give* away. I was resentful of



Forget the salad fixings! Virginia Sole-Smith gets much more satisfaction from flowers, like foxgloves.

the time it took to deal with all that bounty, but also guilt-stricken when I threw away rotting tomatoes because I hadn't gotten to them in time. So when we initially moved to our current home, located as it is in the woods, on the rocky side of a small mountain, I thought with relief that I could swear off gardening. And last spring, when childcare evaporated and both my husband and I were hanging on to our careers and our sanity by a thread, the last thing I needed was the hours of extra work it would take to produce jars of pickles and salsa. I didn't want the pressure or the expectation that my family would eat the rainbow I grew, or that my children would discover a love of kale. The year was hard enough.

But 2020 also meant a quiet yet persistent panic, as the claustrophobia from perpetually being with my beloved spouse and children built toward the knowledge that I needed, sometimes, to escape. And I couldn't go anywhere except my own backyard. So I found myself thinking about the garden constantly. As the parent with the more "flexible" career, I became the default weekday caregiver for our daughters (then ages 6 and 2) for the first time in their lives, cramming my own work into the toddler's nap time. When we were stuck inside on cold days, I ignored a lot of squabbles over Magna-Tiles while I paged through gardening magazines and books, making lists on my phone of planting combinations to try. Once we got past the final frost date, I realized that outdoor garden centers were one of my very few safe, socially distanced options for an outing, so whenever I could hand the kids off to Dan, I began sneaking away to meet my mom, mask up, and shop for shrubs.

When the days got warmer, I could fill at least part of a homebound morning by getting my kids to play outside on their own, within earshot, while I pruned and weeded.

My older daughter enjoyed helping me plant strawberries; my younger daughter gradually learned not to yank leaves off plants. They both loved using the raised beds as balance beams and watching the butterflies and bees that visited the garden. But for the most part, they left me to it.

I needed to be out in the garden, but I didn't much care what we did with what grew in it. So when the groundhog arrived in June to decimate the brassica, I did not despair. I ceded to him the cabbage, kale, and Brussels sprouts, and I planted bright red nasturtiums all around the destruction, which he ignored. I began to think of the garden as a space that, sure, my family enjoyed, but that was clearly mine. I disregarded the virtuous greens and cruciferous vegetables that none of us particularly wanted to eat, and I focused instead on tomatoes, basil, and strawberries, which we all love. Then I added more flowers. Dahlias alongside the berries. Foxgloves next to lettuce. Two of the seven beds in our "vegetable" garden became small fields of cosmos, zinnias, scabiosas, and various flower seedlings I nurtured in order to later transplant to more permanent homes.

Because I was still nominally employed as a writer, there were weeks when I couldn't ignore my deadlines. I'd get up at 5 a.m. to squeeze in extra work before the kids awoke. But first I'd walk the garden and turn on the sprinklers. Then I'd sit on the porch with my laptop, feeling like I was at least starting another isolated day clinging to a little bit of myself before getting lost in a blur of potty training, tantrums, and laundry. On the weekends, I abandoned my family to weed and plant for two to three hours at a stretch. I'd like to tell you that weeding is a moving meditation, as some gardeners claim. But for me, it was more often what I call "rage weeding": a silent scream against the chaos of the world. There was so much we couldn't control. But I could pull Canada thistle out by the armload, my blisters and scrapes proof I was still in this fight.

Watching the garden grow and change was also a reminder that we were, in fact, moving forward in time, despite the seeming standstill of our lives. The strawberry plants we put in as seedlings spread their way through the bed, then bloomed

There was so much we couldn't control. But I could pull Canada thistle out by the armload, my blisters and scrapes proof I was still in this fight.

white flowers, and then made red fruit. The vast expanses of brown dirt I saw in March began to fill with green as the plants grew and knit together. And yet gardening is also a lesson in patience, in waiting out the long game; most of what I planted in 2020 won't look very impressive until two or three years from now. So I have to focus on the less perceptible. I get excited about tiny green shoots or baby leaves unfurling. I notice subtle changes in foliage colors, or sudden new growth in a shrub. These tiny moments are the reward.

Because gardening is work, no question. There is always so much mulch to spread, so many holes to dig, so many thousands of Japanese beetles to pick off my hydrangeas. But for me, it's an entirely different kind of labor from the drudgery that has become my pandemic life: figuring out what to cook for dinner for the millionth time, or scrubbing the toilet. Garden work is creative and tactile. Even the mental-load tasks—designing gardening beds and remembering when to order fall bulbs—are an exquisite distraction from the agony of figuring out pandemic school options or making doctor's appointments. The garden is a project I can always escape into, even if I'm just deadheading the cosmos for a few minutes after dinner while taking the dog out to pee.

The fruits of all this labor may be harder to measure than the bounty of gardeners who put up quart after quart of pickles or stow bushels of squash in cold storage for the winter. We don't grow enough of anything to preserve it for the winter. Come November, I'm back to buying grocery store tomatoes like everyone else. But that's OK. I've planted hellebores, a witch hazel, and a red twig dogwood because they have what gardeners call "four-season interest": ever-green leaves, surprising winter blooms, unusual bark. And when the days are dark and cold, and we're stuck inside, I'm happy to buy our groceries (or order takeout), as long as I can look out on those little moments of refuge. ■



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Virginia Sole-Smith is the author of *The Eating Instinct: Food Culture, Body Image, and Guilt in America*. She lives in the Hudson Valley with her family and her flower beds.

COURTESY OF VIRGINIA SOLE-SMITH; HEADSHOT COURTESY OF GABRIELLE GERARD PHOTOGRAPHY