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Bountiful Garden Produce Inspires Poetry

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Disciplines

Poetry

Bountiful Garden Produce Inspires Poetry

We are coming to the end of our gardening year, and it's been wonderful.

Tomatoes, which for me are the primary reason for a garden, have been more abundant than ever. I have enjoyed some of the heirloom varieties, especially Brandywines and Black Crims. Black Crims, when ripe, have dark green tops that have to be sliced off before they are eaten, and Brandywines are a bit darker than most tomatoes — brandy-colored perhaps — but both are rather large tomatoes that produce especially sweet and juicy fruit.

I have also had a small avalanche of Roma-type tomatoes, but larger than Romas, bright red, and so firm and abundant that I had to bring about 30 of them to our church's garden table.

I have never had so many peppers or such large ones as I have this year; I'm still waiting for some of them to turn red or yellow. I picked another ice cream bucket of beans just this evening and with no backache. That's because I sowed pole (climbing) beans this spring, and I have them climb up metal cattle panels that I stand on end. I swear they would climb to the giant's castle in the sky if I had a cattle panel tall enough. Picking beans is now a pleasure rather than a chore.

What else? Beets that my wife pickled in midsummer using a generations-old recipe of her mother. Carrots that are still in the soil, so long and wide that I'm afraid they will taste more like potatoes than carrots. I am hoping they will sweeten after a frost? And sweet peas and cukes and broccoli and cabbage and cauliflower and onions (too small).

There's also my wife's herb garden.

But I am still waiting for the lushest of all fruits, watermelon. The last time I grew watermelon successfully was about 30 years ago, but I have hope for this year's crop.

Thirty years ago the melons were so good I wrote a poem about them. Here it is, titled "Watermelon Hands."

On that cool spring day

When I took from my hand

*Those small, flat seeds
And placed them in the soil,
Who could have imagined
These seven fat striped beauties?
Now, smiling down stupidly
At this wedge of watermelon
Smiling up crookedly at me,
Juice running down my chin,
I need to know
If the seed knew all along
How it would grow,
Or if, perhaps, it just played a hunch,
Made a snap decision
When its sap began to flow.
Did the seed say
(if seeds indeed could talk),
I think I wanna be a watermelon
Ripe and juicy watermelon
Not a melancholy rutabaga
Or a narrow-minded cuke,
But a jolly watermelon
Round and bawdy, juicy, gaudy watermelon*

*Is what I wanna be?
Did it muster then its
Energy and wit to slowly grow
These seven hymns to sweetness and delight?
Did it grab that hazy pink
At random from the sky?
Did it measure out the sugar
It could hold and still not cloy?
Did it plan the sharp melodic crack
When the knife first bites,
The eager leap with which the melon
Opens to the taste when ripe?
Did all this come by whim or chance,
A hunch and nothing more?
Or did the seed already know its mission
When I dropped it in the soil?
Did some strictly coded DNA
Insist that it must be
A watermelon, ripe and juicy,
Round and bawdy, gushy, gaudy watermelon?
And if that's so
Then I must know*

Who planted that genetic code

Inside the seed I planted in the cold

Spring soil.

For surely gradual accretion

Of component parts, across centuries

Of seed time and of harvest

Cannot explain the mystery of the melons in the seed.

In my heart I know the only hand

That's fine enough to code that little seed

Is the only hand that's large enough

To hold the wide, round world.

But my heart cannot inform my head,

The mystery still stands.

I sit here silent, juice on my face,

With folded, sticky watermelon hands.