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### The Joy of Gardening with Estatira

While many may not appreciate the clay that is the overwhelmingly present form of soil in the state of Georgia, its uniqueness is a marked characteristic of the physical landscape of the state. The thick cement-like ultisol is so compact that it withstands the penetrating rain, which runs off and stained by the pigment of the soil streaks the ground with stripes of an orangy red. This unique soil, while it repels the rain instigating rapid flooding in some areas, also produces some of the sturdiest crops and prettiest flowers. Ankita Ghunawat who studied at Tata Institute of Social Sciences claims, “Identity refers to the stable, defining characteristics of a person that makes them an individual...To know your identity, you must understand both how you differ from others and how you are similar.” Many people identify with other individuals who share similar interests, becoming part of a group. As the qualities of the soil contribute to the identity of the state of Georgia, so do the characteristics of each person and their connections to others define each individual. My connection to the soil and the plants that grow in it bind me not just to my natural surroundings but to other gardeners, people with the same affinity for growing new life in the outdoors as myself.

The modern world considers gardening an activity only practiced by elderly women with arthritis pains and southern men with farmers tans. Farmers and gardeners are viewed by the general public as unintelligent because they are not involved in a heavily academic field. Gardening requires people who have a specific set of traits due to the demands of the activity. A

love of plants and nature is an obvious prerequisite for participating in this activity as the tasks involved can be arduous and motivation should be high. In addition, gardeners as a group have patience, much needed as the tasks done today often do not result in visible results for days or weeks. Gardeners know that the effort they put in will pay off in the future and are willing to wait to see the literal fruits of their labors in the months ahead. Furthermore, gardeners must have vision to plan to do today all the small tasks and decision making that will lead to the next season's harvest or a beautiful display of colors created from carefully combined blooms. A sense of the importance of nature and an aversion for less natural alternatives is often an impetus for gardeners who desire less treated food for the table, food that is not contaminated with chemicals and pesticides used by commercial companies to maximize their profits. Finally, gardeners are persistent. Gardeners know that their care is important to the success of their endeavors and that the plants they are growing depend on their consistency in providing that care.

My own attachment to gardening has grown through the years, sprouting from activities in my kindergarten classroom and while spending time with my dad and maturing as I learned more about both the aesthetics and the organically healthy aspects of the gardening culture. From each of these experiences, I have further defined my own ideals and values. The roots of my gardening experience began with a row of tiny dixie cups, each one the receptacle of two tiny sunflower seeds shoved into the soil by a set of pudgy fingers belonging to a child from my kindergarten classroom. My beautiful, fairy-like kindergarten teacher was in all likelihood fairly certain that many of the little cups would not make it home, that fewer would ever see another drop of water, and that the chances of any of the little plants living long enough to flower was

slim to none. However, I cupped the small cup in my hands as I rode home on the bus and proudly presented it to my dad that evening at home. Here, the plant found its true fairy godfather in the person of my own dad. My father was a gardener, who had the vision to see my flower growing into an adult plant and a love not just of plants but of me that wanted to see me succeed. He helped me care for the plant inside its little cup until it grew large enough to be planted outside and helped me transfer it to its new location, where my love for caring for plants grew with the height of the sunflower reaching its face to the sun. When asked what he enjoyed about the activity, he said, "I got to spend time with you and that was my favorite part. The best part about gardening is how it can be a family activity and not just a singular person one." Watching me follow my dad around the yard as he trimmed, weeded, and watered, my mother decided I needed my own tiny gardening tools, and soon I had a watering can, rake, and shovel, made of metal and not quite small enough to be completely ineffective. I was then able to do things by myself, allowing me to grow my skills. To me, the tools represent the fun times I had planting while growing up and remind me of them when I use them to garden today.

As my interest in plants and gardening grew and I became aware of the role plants have in our lives, I began to experiment with growing food of my own, starting with more familiar plants and expanding to others. I read about how pineapples are grown and started my own pineapple plants from the tops of pineapples we had eaten. Food choices became more important to me, and I became more aware of commercial practices used in produce. My dad said in the interview, "I was influenced to eat better and to pay more attention to my food.. To make sure they were clean because they were outside and to make sure they were safe for us to eat." My dad and I started washing our vegetables in vinegar to make sure to remove more chemicals from

the surface of our food. He said in addition, I began reading about food additives and being more aware of the artificial coloring that is added to our food. My interest in gardening led to an interest in making healthier nutritional choices. Subsequently, I began to be more aware of the economics involved in gardening and how gardening practices in other parts of the world affects the environment and the living conditions of people in other countries. In particular, I learned about how crops such as coffee, bananas, and coffee impact the deforestation of the rainforest and the chance of extinction for species such as the orangutan. I also became aware of the labor practices that negatively impact agricultural workers in other countries, such as the use of child labor in the harvesting of the cacao beans used for chocolate production. One impact of my connection with gardening has been to make me more aware of my own health habits, the health of the environment, and the impact of my consumer choices on the lives of others.

While traveling with my family to France to visit my aunt, I experienced first hand the beauty of the formal gardens there. As we toured Paris, we saw as many of them as possible. In part, this was due to the fact that my brother and I longed to be outside after hours examining windows of churches as well as Grecian urns and other relics in the museums. The effect of seeing gardens in the middle of a busy city like Paris impressed upon me the need for nature in our lives and the relaxation that results from experiencing natural surroundings. Whether running through the trees in the more natural parks or gazing at the fish in the carefully placed water features of the geometrically symmetrical formal gardens, the joy that I felt at the freedom of the outdoors and the calmness that came from experiencing the peacefulness of the plantings combined to maximize their impact. According to Colin Campbell-Preston, the founder of Capital Gardens, “Not only can regular gardening reduce mental health problems like depression

and anxiety, but it can also reduce stress and combat high blood pressure, as well as improving overall physical fitness.” Being outside and connected to nature has psychological benefits due to the influence of being outdoors and the chemical reactions that occur during physical activity. In addition, the act of nurturing, whether for animals or plants, also has proven positive psychological benefits. Gardening is an activity that, like yoga, encourages self-reflection, as the individual is given time to think while staying busy. The University of Minnesota cites studies that indicate that time spent outdoors is correlated with positive moods and that patients who are allowed to spend time observing natural surroundings report less pain. In order to show the positive effects of gardening, Muddy days blog writes, “Playing in the mud will make you happier!...These [microscopic bacteria] increase the level of serotonin in our brains..making you happier!” There are scientific reasons behind the reasons for joy when gardening and being happier makes me a more positive person who can be a better friend and citizen. My interest in gardening has made me more aware of the need to experience the outdoors and to participate in outdoor exercise as an important part of mental as well as physical health.

My connection with gardening has also contributed to my interest in art and my fascination with the use of color. My father would always make sure to pick the most colorful plantings that were available because he knew how much I loved colorful flowers. The act of planting these flowers in the flowerbeds, determining their locations and how they would interact with each other as they grew allowed me to consider in a practical way how to manipulate colors to create art. One of the historic sites that we visited in Paris was the palace of Versailles and its intricate system of gardens. My aunt made sure we went on the day that they turn on the fountains so that we could see the gardens at their most magnificent. The combination of

manmade and natural elements, the colors of the flowers, the shading of the greenery, and the sparkle of sunlight on the water spraying from the fountains interacted together as elements in a living work of art. My interest in gardening has contributed to my love of color and texture and inspires me to create. Gardening also allows me to enjoy the results of my creation in a very tangible way as the things I grow can be experienced not just through sight, but also through scent and texture, and is enhanced by the sound of nature surrounding me.

Gardening is sometimes perceived as an activity for elderly people, and gardening is not considered a fun and exciting hobby by most young people. Gardening is also not considered an activity that would increase one's popularity and is thought of as an activity that people typically participate in alone. People of all ages can garden and enjoy its benefits, and while solitude is one of the qualities that some people do enjoy as part of gardening and that can lend to the element of relaxation that is part of gardening, gardening is also an activity that bonds people together. Caring for the environment, being aware of nature and plants, and concern for the development of locally grown food sources unite enthusiasts at farmers markets, in gardening centers, and at informational events at venues such as nature centers. In some areas, such as Wills Park, community gardens allow even more opportunities for gardeners to interact on a personal level. Gardening can even support the local community. During the government shutdown this month, organizations such as the Dekalb County Community Gardens offered food to furloughed workers.

While I also identify as a musician, a guard member, and a girl scout, my relationship with gardening has had a unique impact on the development of views about my world and my relationship with it. Just like that first sunflower plant, my connection with gardening has

grown, and with each new experience the principals, knowledge, and nurturing that are part of the gardening experience have resulted in increased awareness and the development of new values in other areas. My interest in the growth and beauty of plants has led to increased awareness of the need to value healthy and safe food as well as make environmentally conscious and responsible purchasing choices. It has led me to be more aware of the effect of nature, exercise, and relaxation for good physical and mental health. Finally, it has enhanced my appreciation of the aesthetic beauty of the natural world.

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