

Organic Vegetables in Santa Fe

Adobe buildings showed us soil as habitat when we lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico, 7000 feet up in the Sangre de Cristo mountains. Potted geraniums grew on porches, in yards and windows. Art galleries and handcraft shops downtown drew in tourists and spit out tourists.

Summer afternoons, dark clouds stacked up above the mountain, crowded hot summer sunshine out of the sky, threw jagged, sharp lightning to the earth, and shook the mountain with thunder. Rain fell hard and cleaned the city and the mountain.

Laura held our daughter, Juniper, one year old, on the windowsill, so she could reach the rain. Juniper leaned out the window, and water cascading from the rain gutter soaked her. She laughed at the bounty the sky gave her. When she started to feel too cold, Laura took her into the bathroom and bathed her in warm water. Hard rain lasted 25 minutes. Clouds broke up, and the sun shone from the blue mountain sky again.

The commune we moved to Santa Fe to be part of, and I would be gardener and Laura would take care of the children, fell apart before it started. Laura and Juniper and I moved to a small apartment close to downtown.

Four years before, a drunk driver hit me as I rode a motorcycle on my way into the Sacramento Valley in northern California. Injuries from that wreck limited my ability to work, to earn money. I could do almost any kind of work outdoors, but I couldn't hold a full-time job. I could work hard, but not for more than half a day. I couldn't work indoors. Muscular soreness I didn't have before the wreck drove me crazy if I sat in a chair for an hour.

I met Laura two years after the wreck. We lived without a high regard for my ability to earn money, without much consideration for the distant future, without a lot of attention to acquiring material wealth. We stayed happy living that way.

I signed up for rehabilitation counseling, to try to fit into some kind of steady job. I didn't fit into a long-lasting job through that program, but the counselor, Richard, said he needed help getting a house he had bought two blocks from our place ready to rent. Afternoons, after he got off work, and Saturday mornings, I helped him repair plumbing, sand floors, varnish floors, and paint rooms. I met Tom and Deena, who made a deal with Richard to rent the house. I made a deal with Tom and Deena to help them build a garden for a share in the garden.

In the cool of the morning, Laura and Juniper and I walked downtown. Laura carried Juniper facing her, warm against her, snuggled into her. When it was my turn to carry Juniper, I carried her facing forward, her back against me, a chair of my arms, so she could see where we were going.

I made up a song, "He calls me funny honey, and he kisses my toes. He calls me funny honey, and he brings me a rose. He calls me funny honey, and he touches my nose." Juniper loved it. We sang that song and other songs as we walked. Juniper walked a ways while Laura held one of her hands and I held the other.

The garden at Tom and Deena's grew well in Santa Fe's

mountain summer sunshine.

Tomato plants grew. Squash, corn, potatoes, cabbage, kohlrabi, carrots, pumpkins. Sunflower stalks grew higher than the house. Broccoli, lettuce, peas, beans, onions, garlic, beets. Tom built a greenhouse against the south side of their house. Many people came to see Tom and Deena. Everyone tracked in abrasive granite soil. Varnish Richard and I had worked hard to prepare for and then to put down smoothly began to wear.

Tom and Deena flew to the ocean on vacation. I watered the garden, planted more seeds, pulled weeds, spread straw and hay mulch thickly. I met Richard at the house, and we finished projects we'd saved for a time when Tom and Deena were away. I saw Richard's agony when he realized Tom and Deena weren't as careful of the house as he would have been. He asked me, "Can you tell them, have everybody take off their shoes when they come in?"

I said, "I'll tell them." When I worked in the garden again, I spread hay mulch thickly up to the front porch and up to the back door. I didn't think people would take off their shoes. Nobody loved the house as much as Richard did. But the mulch helped. People walked into the house with cleaner shoes. I cleaned floors and polished them with hard wax. Once they were clean, they didn't look as damaged as they did when they were dirty. Wax helped protect them.

Tom and Deena rode the big airplane again and came back from vacation. Tom went back to work filling prescriptions downtown.

The sun rose into blue sky. I walked up to the garden at Tom and Deena's place. I harvested lettuce, radishes, summer squash, tiny carrots to thin the bed of carrots and to have crisp, tender, flavorful bites. Tom worked downtown at the drugstore. Deena came out of the house and looked shocked at my harvest. The demon of possession had entered her soul. She owned the garden. I saw it in her eyes.

She asked me, "What are you doing?" Her voice edged into panic and disapproval, started into anger.

I said, "While you and Tom played in the ocean and ate expensive meals in restaurants, I watered, raked, planted seeds, pulled weeds, spread mulch, took complete care of this garden we all worked together to start. Did you know I did that? Sharing in a garden means I get some of the harvest. It doesn't mean I do a massive amount of work and walk away with nothing in my hands. We agreed on this when we started this garden."

She blinked in sunlight and paused. She put her thoughts more in order. She said, "I guess you did work when we were gone, or the garden would have died. Yes, you are part of the garden, and that part includes some harvest."

I got down on my knees, picked squash blossoms and put them in my basket.

Deena asked, "But why pick blossoms?"

"I'll dip these blossoms in beaten eggs and fry them in a hot pan. Laura and Juniper and I will eat them for dinner. They're good."

"But if you pick the blossoms, there won't be any squash."

"Look at these squash plants. They beg us to thin the blossoms. They'll bear an abundance of squash. Mid summer, you'll give squash to everyone you know and ask them to take more. You'll harvest so many squash, you'll never want to see another one."

She reached into my basket and picked up a blossom. She turned the blossom toward me. She said, "Look. It's female. It's waiting for the male, for pollen. It needs the male, pollen to fertilize it." She looked into my eyes. She said, "I've been getting a tan in the greenhouse. You can't see into the greenhouse, but it's hot and sunny. It's a beautiful place to lie naked against the earth."

She still wanted something for vegetables from her garden I'd put into my basket to carry home for my family. She wanted something for lettuce, radishes, summer squash, tiny carrots, for squash blossoms, for female blossoms waiting in hot sunshine for male pollen to come into them. She stepped closer to me than I wanted her to be.

If I stood up where I was, I would be closer to her than I wanted to be, but backing away before I stood up would mean crawling into the squash bush and breaking its vines, so I stood up, so close to her, I felt the heat of her existence radiating to me. I laughed and stepped to the side. I put one step between us, then another. I said, "Try it. Pick blossoms, not all from the same place. Spread them out, so you don't leave any vine bare of blossoms."

Deena looked confused. She didn't understand what I was laughing at. I thought, "I'm not laughing with you. I'm laughing at you," but I didn't say it. I said, "Beat some eggs. Salt the eggs, but go easy on the salt. You want the flavor of blossoms, not salt. Dip the blossoms in egg and fry them in a hot pan just long enough to be hot through and the egg cooked. When Tom comes home. They're good in soup, too. Squash blossom soup. Use other vegetables too, and squash blossoms. Put the squash blossoms in last and cook them just long enough to be hot through. Don't dip them in egg when you cook them in soup."

I turned and walked down the dirt road toward home. I thought Deena was still mad at me, but she was no longer sure what she was mad about. She thought I was right. I worked in the garden, with them, and when they were on vacation, I worked in the garden, so I share in the harvest. That's fair. That's what we agreed on. She had the confusion in her mind almost clear by the time I disappeared from her sight, on my way home.

I sang into sunshine, into blue, mountain sky, "He calls me funny honey, and he kisses my toes. He calls me funny honey, and he brings me a rose. He calls me funny honey, and he touches my nose."

Deena turned and walked back into her house. She carried one squash blossom through Santa Fe's intense summer sunshine. Words from my song echoed from the mountain blue sky around her.

When the sun hangs low in the sky and trees cast shade into her garden, in late afternoon quiet, she'll come back out and harvest vegetables and more squash blossoms for soup or for fried squash blossoms and steamed vegetables for dinner, when Tom comes home from work.