# The tastiest treats are those we grow ourselves


Phil Power

In England, where they don't have much of it, these days at the end of August are called "high summer."

The Brits are right. Now is the height of the summer, especially here in Michigan.

Maybe because the sun is lower, the light has turned to golden, bringing out the strong colors of the black-eyed Susans and cardinal flowers that brighten the late- summer gardens. The nights are getting cooler, so the sleeping is better, certainly better than it was just a few weeks ago.

The farmers' markets are jam-packed with the bounty of the season – corn, peppers, eggplant, cantaloupe and watermelon, tomatoes, peaches, the first of the fall raspberries.

When I was a kid, my parents used to pack me off to summer camp, all seven weeks of it. Once I got over being homesick, I liked it OK. But to me, the high point of the summer was coming home in August. My father would grill steak in the back yard; my mother would make peach pie, and I would eat corn on the cob to my heart's content. What a homecoming in high summer, especially after having to endure seven weeks of Mystery Meat, so beloved of so many camp cooks.

I've been thinking about all this in recent days because my wife, Kathy, and I have been experimenting with our vegetable garden this year.

Sure, we grow the standards: Rhubarb to greet the first warm days of spring in pies or stewed (my grandmother insisted it was the best spring tonic!); fresh-dug potatoes, beets and carrots; sweet peas and green beans (what a lot of work for such a small yield of deliciousness); raspberries (ours bear in June and again in August and September).

Early this spring, Kathy pulled out the garden catalog, smiled happily and announced: "This year we're going to grow heirloom tomatoes. I'm sick and tired of those miserable excuses for tomatoes we get in the supermarkets." So, heirloom tomatoes it was. And when the young plants arrived in April, they looked so miserable and slight in their black plastic pots!

We planted them with limited expectations. And for a while, they just sat there, looking grumpily at us. Then the weather warmed, we got a little rain and they just took off. Today, they've grown far beyond their cages, and we've got heirloom tomatoes all over the place. And what tomatoes! Little cherry tomatoes, bright orange and so sweet as to remind me the tomato is a fruit, not a vegetable. Pinkish ones that look unripe at first but taste sensational when paired with a little olive oil and a couple of basil leaves. Bright golden little globes that burst with flavor, served alone or with a few grains of salt.

The intensity of flavor of these old varieties has been a revelation to us as the summer has come into its height.

All this has led me to reflect on what's happened to our eating over my 60-odd years.

Back when I was a little boy, our family diet varied with the season. In winter, when you couldn't get anything fresh at the store, we'd eat potatoes, brussels sprouts and apples, things that would keep in the fruit cellar. And we'd eat all the vegetables from the garden that my mother canned the previous summer.

Come spring, we'd rejoice in the first fresh rhubarb. As summer came on, we'd eat all kinds of fresh fruits and vegetables, some fresh from my grandparents' garden, some from the store. In the fall, we'd have squash, cauliflower, turnips, plums and maybe some game (my father liked to hunt).

***Kathy's heirloom tomatoes were bred when the idea of picking stuff before it was ripe and shipping it around the country was considered nonsense. That was a simpler time, certainly, but it also was a time of more vivid flavors and a family diet that seemed to fit the feel of the seasons as they turned.***

Today's supermarkets are crammed with all kinds of what might be called "industrial food." The freezers are filled with packages of frozen foods of all kinds, regardless of the season. "Fresh" produce is trucked in from California, or even flown in from South America or Israel.

Thanks to our modern food-growing and distribution system, we can eat what we want when we want, regardless of the season. I can get "fresh" tomatoes in the winter, but the varieties are selected for mass production, to be picked green and shipped long distance around the country in ethylene-filled containers. And I'll gladly trade a bite of a peach, sweet and juicy, picked fresh off the tree to the ones you see in the supermarkets off-season.

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I'm delighted some of the older varieties are coming back on the market.

Growing them and eating them subject to the discipline of the season and the uncertainties of the weather help keep us rooted in simple reality.

And they sure taste great!

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Joni Hubred

# Parents aren't putting kids' health, safety above all

Jonathan is almost two months old. He smiles, but we're not sure why.

Perhaps that's the beauty of being two months old.

He is my youngest brother Jason's son, and the first child born into our family in almost 15 years. The first time I hold him, I start to tell him stories about his father – and then I stop, because words suddenly seem meaningless.

Even when he cries, all I want to do is hold him closer and rock him until he settles down. Of course, I am only The Auntie. His father and mother are never far away when the wailing begins. They wait patiently with a bottle or a clean diaper.

And then sometimes, all it takes is a few minutes in the swivel chair that clicks when I rock back and forth. From my lap, Jonathan has a good view of the ceiling fan, although he probably can't see it clearly yet.

Its motion is enough to quiet him until he's sleeping. Unwilling to move, I sit and think about a story my mother told me the night before.

Somewhere across town, a 17-year-old young woman is facing an unplanned pregnancy. She works nights and lives with friends, one of whom is likely the child's father.

She says her mother was never around; she has been on her own since she was 15.

She sees her father "sometimes."

Adoption is on her mind. She seems certain she can't keep her baby, because she had no mothering. How, then, can she be a mother?

Shaniqua Betty faced that choice when she conceived her son, Isaiah. She chose to keep him, perhaps hoping for a better life than the one she survived, shuffled from one foster home to another. If that was her goal, she failed miserably.

After a fight with the baby's father, Betty ran from her home. At a bus stop, she struck up a conversation with a stranger and later left her baby with the man. A few days later, the man led police to Isaiah's body, which he had stuffed under a mattress after the child died.

Holding a tiny, helpless infant close, I find it impossible to imagine how a woman – even one as psychologically and emotionally damaged as Betty – could have handed her child over to a stranger in the dead of night. Isn't mothering an instinct so innate that a woman would instinctively throw herself in the path of certain death to save her child?

I think – no, I am *afraid* – that is not so today.

This summer, more than most, it seems, suffering children have dominated the news, children who appear to share a common bond.

Isaiah, whose mother didn't want to take him when she ran home to get her shoes.

Babies forgotten or purposefully left in cars that acted like ovens in the summer heat.

An infant whose crying so annoyed the mother's boyfriend that he dealt the child a fatal blow, just outside a hospital emergency room.

Children younger than 6 left home alone while parents spent a night at the casino.

These children suffered because parents didn't put their safety and well-being above all else – above annoyance and convenience, above the distractions of work or pleasure and the rush of a busy day. That's selfishness, and no cause for pity.

The system didn't fail Shaniqua Betty. She failed her child. People with greater challenges than hers have achieved far more; why should she be excused?

I look into Jonathan's deep, confused blue eyes, and I can't help but wonder how a parent could forget or set aside the ultimate responsibility parents are supposed to have for their children, every moment of every day of every week.

And then I think how often I've failed my own children. How they have survived my mistakes. How we have grown.

When she told me about her 17-year-old coworker's decision to give up her baby, my mother reminded me her own parents died when she was just a child. "And I still managed to raise four kids. I wasn't a perfect parent, but I think they turned out pretty well."

Like her, I am not a perfect parent. I have been selfish and inept, naive and trusting, blind beyond belief.

But also like her, I have done the one thing every parent must do, without fail – my very best to keep my children safe from harm.

I haven't always succeeded, but I've never stopped trying.

Somehow, watching my little brother lift his first-born son from my arms and cradle him close helps me understand just how important that is.

Jonathan is a lucky little boy. Someday, I must remember to tell him why.

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