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Our "Potager" in Southwestern France

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This summer of 2010 has been full of joyful gardening. We are not new to growing our own food and flowers, and we are still learning with each season, searching books and the internet for new information and answers to questions. We live in a country famous for great food and wine, France. Here in our life, the importance of delicious and healthy food is of great importance to everyone. At noon every day, the shops close, commerce takes a break, workers lay down their tools, tractors are left in the middle of the fields and traffic on the main roads thins down to a trickle. For two hours, families and friends relax around a table to enjoy conversation and a delicious meal of several courses.

Our market day is Saturday. Baskets brimming over with cheese, olives, freshly baked bread, fruit and vegetables, we stop at the café on the market square for a hot chocolate or coffee and to chat with friends. We are lucky to have beautiful homegrown vegetables from small producers all through the year. Planting a vegetable garden or *potager* as it is called in French, is not a necessity. However, one sees a beautifully tended potager in nearly every back yard.

This year my partner Mark and I decided to make a kitchen garden with our neighbors. I have had many gardens throughout my life but this was the first time I had shared a garden with friends. Without any real discussion we found that each one of us had some special garden chore they enjoyed the most, and without

discussion each person gave that part of themselves that made them the happiest. There were moments during the season that I felt the plants were growing ecstatically. Did the joy of the gardeners influence the vegetables? Hmmm, I wonder. We made a small area next to the garden with lawn chairs and a table, and often someone would arrive with a cooler full of cold drinks and snacks. The garden became an area of relaxation and immense joy, friendship and the sharing of recipes and harvests. As the nights grew warmer, we pitched our tent just near the garden to sleep under the sky bright with stars.

This year, I found myself in a wheelchair for a short time. The garden is not close to the house but we could reach it by car. Mark would lift me down onto the path among the vegetables and there I would spend the morning, lost in the jungle of plants. I would scoot backwards very slowly brushing on tomatoes, mint, rosemary, thyme, parsley, basil and onions. The perfume from each plant lifted my spirits. The evident joy of this garden helped me to get through these difficult days. I would sit for as long as I wished, watching ladybugs or thinning carrots. Like this, I found the first signs of caterpillars marching in formation to attack the broccoli. Fortunately we were able to save the crop with a garlic spray. I have decided to always spend time in the garden either sitting or laying among the plants. Why have I always been too busy thinking about weeding and watering?

This year I felt deeply the importance of close contact between plants and people. I felt deeply how the garden not only nourishes our bodies but our spirits. I had time to meditate on the gifts of the garden, not only in the food that we harvest, not only in the beneficial physical aspects of gardening, but the relationship of the earth, the plants and the people involved. I have read about it, I have realized it before, talked to friends about it, but this year I felt it on a deep level.

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