

Aging in Place: No tomatoes this year

By Marian Knapp

Every year for the past decade or so I have grown tomatoes in pots in my backyard. The front of my house faces north and only gets sun in the earlier morning. But by about 11 a.m. the sun begins to show itself around the back of the house and relaxes there until late in the afternoon. It is the perfect spot to grow light-loving tomatoes. The reason I grow them in pots is because my house used to be the tennis court for the big Victorian next to me and the earth in my narrow yard seems dense, tough, and unyielding. I could never have enough energy to turn the soil over to prepare a nice bed for tomatoes or any other kind of edible. Pots are a lot easier—less to deal with, fewer weeds to pull, and nice to look at with each contained plant in its own private space. Maybe I personalize my relationship with my tomato plants since, I too, like to have my own private space.

My tomato experience varies from year to year. Sometimes I get a big crop and, other years, nasty things happen and I get fewer, unhappy looking tomatoes. Last year I had a wonderful variety of heirlooms— big ones, small ones, and lovely yellow ones. They made a great chopped salad along with some lettuce, olives, cucumbers, red onion, and feta cheese. Delicious in the hot summer time with a pile of soft pita.

Sometimes my neighbor would bring over her pots of tomatoes and put them in a line with all the others. She gets very little sun in her yard but her plants do pretty well in mine. So, in this way, we share the sun and also the yield, depending on the year. It is a lovely communal thing.

But this year I didn't get to plant tomatoes and neither did she. My excuse was that I was too busy. I don't know why she didn't put some pots out—maybe for the same reason. By the time I got to thinking about planting, it was already the middle of July. I pulled all of the weeds that had grown high enough to see from my back windows with some hope that I could still get a tomato or two. Yet, when I called a local nursery for advice, they told me it was too late. "Next year," they said.

So, the pots stand empty and gloomy with their desiccated soil, and without their annual contents. I miss the green plant presence in the yard and the little excitement when I see the first tiny yellow flowers that tell me, indeed, I will have some tomatoes. I also miss the smell. The greenery of the tomato plants has a distinctive odor —fresh and wholesome— but which has no resemblance to the aroma of their ultimate fruits.

This all makes me somewhat sorrowful. I miss the experience of growing and harvesting, and I will miss having my own special tomatoes. I can go to the farmer's market and get them farm-fresh and they will be delicious. But it is not the same. I didn't have the pleasure

of planting them, watering them, watching them mature, being surprised at how tall the stalks get, and then picking them just at the right time for a great big salad. Besides, the tomatoes at the stands aren't as interesting as my home-grown ones which are often oddly shaped, with the cores not quite aligned, with one side much more bulbous than the other, and with disparate patterns of green, orange, and red. Only I know when they are ripe enough to pick and I am rarely disappointed.

So—no tomatoes this year. It is a tiny gap, which in the bigger picture of my life is quite small. But my soulful reaction is telling me that this little loss has more significance than I give it credit for. Perhaps it's that these lovely little miracles bolster my tenuous connection to the natural world and all the mysteries it holds. Maybe it is because I miss the simple but very productive spring and summer-time routine—a little work for a generous and sweet return. Maybe it is because I know I will not have the exciting experience of tasting yummy things that I nurtured myself. Or maybe it is because I don't know what next year will bring for me.

As I continue to get older, I understand more and more the impossibility of predicting what is ahead and appreciate profoundly the importance of taking advantage of every opportunity right now. Sadly, I missed this round of tomatoes, but hope I will be planting and reaping again in the next season.

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