

Ripple Effect # 66

My Grandmother's Garden By Barbara Olive

I'm surprised that the memory of my grandmother's flower garden has remained with me for so many years. I lived, what was in the 1940s and 50s a distance from my grandmother—70 miles from our farm on this northern prairie to her small town—so visits were not frequent. When we did make the drive, we usually went to the home of one of my mother's many sisters and brothers who lived on farms nearby, where my grandmother was invited as well. A stop at my grandmother's house, if it happened at all, was usually brief, or limited to special occasions, like Christmas Eve. So I'm surprised that I can recall her backyard gardens at all.

Earlier in her life, when she still lived on the farm with her husband and eleven children, she tended a large garden plot dedicated to vegetables west of an equally large house. One had to look closely to notice, against the south side of the house, efforts at hollyhocks, golden rods and tiger lilies, together with a modest plot of ferns and vines on the southeast corner and, further off from the house, sweet peas scaling a fence.

This unequal balance between vegetable garden and flower garden was reversed when, some years after the death of her spouse, Grandmother moved to town and her entire backyard became flowers! The garden was unlike anything else I knew about life on this northern mixed-grass prairie ground where I was born and raised, whose slightly graveled farmyards were, most of the time, dry and dusty.

I recall walking among Grandmother's flowers, many of them contending in their height with my own—some were taller even than Grandmother! Though I was too young to recognize flowers by name, they must have included the hollyhocks, golden rods, tiger lilies, irises and sweet peas of the farm, together with pansies, marigolds and snap dragons. All I know is that standing there surrounded by an abundance of blooms of soft hues, I felt wonderment.

The look of our lives and landscapes has changed substantially in the past fifty years. Many today are town folk from birth. Both urban and farm homes are typically surrounded by green Kentucky-grass lawns, whose popularity took off following World War II.

So, what might we learn from recalling our grandmothers' gardens?

- We might learn that gardens can play significant roles—practical or aesthetic—in our lives and that our grandmothers were doing a form of “plantscaping” far before we knew that water-thirsty Kentucky bluegrass lawns may not be the best answer to landscaping on our semi-arid prairie (generally, only 50 percent of an existing lawn is actively used).
- We can learn that it doesn't take many plants to transform a yard or make a profusion of flowers, especially if we remember to space perennials for their mature size. And just think of how a rock or woodchip walkways might add viewing points, along with their own visual appeal!
- We might even try some things our grandmothers may not have thought of—working in native flower varieties, adding tufts of native prairie grasses to our landscaping—and we can be creating memories and wonderment in our own backyards at the same time that we are helping our environment.

Fall is approaching. The time to develop plans and a landscape design for next growing season.
A time to remember our grandmothers' gardens.