

Helen Gunderson's garden on Burnett in Ames
Journal entry on May 9, 2009
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I borrowed the neighbor's ladder to clean out my rain gutters to help prevent the possibility of more water in my basement like the one-inch high pool in the corner of one room earlier this spring when we had heavy rains. While I had the ladder, I climbed onto the roof of my one-story house and photographed my back yard. The camera faces east, northeast. My property ends at the chain link fence on the far edge of the photo. My lot is 15,400 square feet, and the area of vegetable and fruit production is probably one tenth of an acre.

At the back of the lot is an old Concord grape vine that was there when I bought the property in 2006 and a patch of Polana raspberries that I planted in 2007. There is also a raspberry bed in the lower left hand part of the photo. I planted it in 2008.

Last year, I had several small beds, each with a chicken wire fence around it. This year, a college student friend of mine, Jonathan, and I worked together for a day, using a lot of my accumulated collection of wire, to create a fence around the circumference of the whole area my main garden. See the white tops of the steel posts in the front and far left hand corners.

When I stood on the roof to view the garden, I was surprised at what a small percentage of the garden seemed to be developed. After all, I had spent many hours during many previous days and weeks with shovel and on hands and knees working the soil to make beds and transplant seedling or sow seeds.

The photo is somewhat of an optical allusion. The brown of the meandering wood chip paths blend in with the lasagna-layered beds that I established last fall and the patches where I had planted potatoes and covered them with a light layer of straw this spring. Actually, I felt good that there was so little openly-tilled, black soil and that so much of the garden was covered with mulch. That's much different than a lot of agriculture and traditional gardening in Iowa.

I didn't get as many lasagna beds established as I would have liked last September. So in March, I built another one, putting down manure that I had carted home last fall, then covering it with straw, leaves, newspaper and cardboard and weighing the layers down with boards. Some of the wood had been part of a wheel chair ramp for a previous owner of my home. Some was from the bounty of loft beds that I collected at the university residence halls at spring checkout time in 2007. The system worked OK, but in spite of using the wood for ballast, the strong spring winds tore at some of the cardboard, shifting the bed out of its original position.

Just this week, I had gotten my order of basil, bell peppers, and tomatoes from Lonna of Onion Creek Farm and was glad the beds were ready. Within a day, I had all of her plants planted. That night, I read my copy of *The Garden Primer* and realized that peppers don't like cold weather. But the plants were already in the ground.

It was hard to know whether or not to add protection to the peppers with the prospects of temperatures getting down to around 40 in the next few days. Fortunately, Jonathan had helped

me cut the bottoms off of several plastic, gallon milk jugs, and I put one over each plant as a miniature green house.

When I was living in Gilbert but looking for a home in Ames, I wanted a yard big enough to plant at least one apple tree and a small garden. So it is with awe that I think that I ended up with this large of yard that is so open to sunshine. The tree in the photo is one of two cherry trees that I bought and planted in 2007. But my greatest tree success story is that I had learned to graft apple trees in 2006 and have six trees growing in my yard that are a result of my grafting efforts. Four were started with scion wood from a 83-year-old Wealthy tree at the abandoned farmstead where my grandparents' had lived. The other two are from a Sweet 16 tree at the home of friends near my hometown.

Although I have a large garden, I feel like I am running out of space. A friend had given me some spinach seed, but I was reluctant to grow it because I am more a fan of kale and collards, and I didn't want to take up precious ground space with spinach. So I put spinach seed in pots that I had used in my container garden on my apartment deck in Gilbert. I anticipate that after I pick the spinach, it will be about the time when more soil needs to be mounded over the potato patches, and I will be able to use the soil from the pots for the job.

I like kale—the taste, nutritional aspects, and ease of use. Also, kale provides a continuous source of great greens during the growing season. It's not like cabbage where a gardener waits until there is one mature head, if fortune allows, then picks it, and the plant is done. Last fall, I asked advice of many people about how to extend the season of my kale plants or perhaps over-winter them. In March or so, I thought my efforts were for naught. The plants appeared to be totally dead—the remaining stems white with no green color. But a few others actually came to life. What a pleasant surprise.

I noticed this past week that the kale plants were starting to make little balls and were either beginning to flower or seed. I was afraid they might bolt like cilantro, and their growth would be done. But I guess they will continue to grow, and if they flower and seed, I may have a somewhat wild patch that will naturally come back each year. It wasn't until last year that I first got an inkling of what a biennial plant is when I was reading about carrots and beets. Apparently, if left in the ground over the winter and able to grow a second season, they will produce flowers and seeds. Hopefully that will happen with a couple of my kale beds.

Speaking of carrots, my friend Gary of Growing Harmony Farms southeast of Ames says that one of his secrets to growing carrots is to cover the seed bed with burlap and keep it moist until the carrots have germinated. I tried that with carrot and beet seeds this spring. So far, the beets are doing fine. But I haven't seen signs of success with the carrots. Perhaps I will simply let Gary grow carrots for me. He is renowned throughout the state for his carrots. But even so, I have this notion that I must at least make a good attempt to prove to myself that I can grow carrots. The burlap bag and its artwork, such as a colorful parrot, also add character to the garden.

Another important book is Gaia's Garden about permaculture. It is critical of how so many gardeners replicate the row crop model of agriculture and recommends small patches with a mixture of plants in order to work with nature. Instead of a huge bed of cabbage and letting the

predators consume it with no competition, put one cabbage plant here and another there. I don't understand plant life, or nature either, well enough to be a full devotee of permaculture, but I do have small beds and more than one variety of each vegetable for diversity.

This is the second year that I have grown garlic, planting the cloves last fall in four patches. Three in my backyard, and one next to my driveway in the front yard. The garlic will be ready to harvest in early July, then I will be able to plant something else in its place—perhaps more beets, kale, or collards. Or maybe I can let a bed lie fallow and begin to build lasagna layers for 2010.

When I first moved here, there was a garden over-run with weeds at the back of the lot by my neighbor's hedge on the north (the left side of the photo below). The previous owners let me come, even before we closed my purchase of the house on June 16, 2006, so that I could begin to weed. Oh, there was a ton of Creeping Charlie to pull out. On Memorial Day weekend, I planted asparagus. Later I transplanted rhubarb from a shady spot on the other side of the lot to the area, planted strawberries, and added one of the Wealthy apple trees that I grafted. Steve, who calls himself The Garden Assistant helped put up the fence. The wooden posts in the corners are ones I redeemed from a pile in the grove at my grandparents' farm.

I am glad this is the fourth year of the asparagus patch so that I can pick as much as I want, but there hasn't been the bounty I had hoped for—at least, not yet. I saw Gary at a block party Saturday night for several graduating sustainable agriculture students. He said that each year in July, he begins piling lots of manure and other organic matter on his asparagus beds. I guess I will do that this year. The strawberry plants have certainly rambled. I don't know if they are going to be too much competition for the asparagus. The rhubarb is thriving, seemingly unaffected by the rambling strawberries, and I have already consumed some and shared others with friends.

Tonight, my heart sank when I saw that my neighbor was spraying her turf to kill violets and maybe Creeping Charlie on the other side of the hedge. I had known she was going to spray in other areas such as near the side walk. It's a long story, but here's the essence. She had supposedly done her research by talking to the neighbor across the street who knows a lot about horticulture and the folks at Earl May, moved with her hose and sprayer to the back yard in the area near the hedge which is close to our boundary line and, at most, 10 feet away from my rhubarb, strawberries, and asparagus. I expressed concern, she said there would be no risk to my garden, I plucked some blades of grass to test the wind direction, there was a breeze coming directly south—in other words, directly toward my garden, but she was at a distance from me and intent on getting the job done.

I called my horticulture-wise neighbor, Joan, across the street. She was on a tight schedule, preparing for a demanding week. But she had a sliver of time to talk. She said that there must have been some misunderstanding, there had been a wind, she had smelled chemicals, it had not been a good time for spraying, and the only thing I could do was to hose down my garden. I had not used city water in my garden yet this year because I have four, 50-gallon rain barrels that generally serve my outdoor watering needs. But I carry water from them in watering cans, and the barrels do not provide much pressure. In other words, they would be of little use for the job at hand. I went to the basement and opened the valve for the outdoor hydrant, got out my hoses,

and borrowed one from Joan. Perhaps I averted a problem. However, I had intended to pick a few stalks of asparagus for supper, and my neighbor's spraying activity ruined any desire to do so. I also wondered how soon I would be able to have friends come again and pick from my bounty of rhubarb.

For the most part, my neighbor who did the spraying and I get along well, but I guess we have things to work things out regarding the use of chemicals. The incident was a grim reminder of how pervasive chemicals are in our society. I think of all the springtime ads from lawn companies and the nearby hardware store for chemical lawn treatments and how so many people view their turf as a throne. I guess that's another way that I am in tune with the book Gaia's Garden. I care about growing healthy food here and am fine with a natural yard. Yes, I like tidiness and wonder how I am going to keep my turf in halfway decent condition when I am using most of my ambition and time to grow vegetables. But certainly, I do not want a pristine lawn.

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