

WALTER BRAUN, MY GREEN DAD

Hattie Braun

When I was a teenager, my dad retired and moved our family of six from Maryland to Donation, Pennsylvania, a rural burg of three churches, two cemeteries, a couple dozen houses, a grange, and lots and lots of cows. Shortly upon settling in, the farmer from up the way brought over a load of cow manure to secure my dad's vote to change an almost century-old law against selling alcohol in Oneida Township. My dad wasn't enticed so much with the purchase of alcohol as the free manure that would be delivered annually to his small plot of land for the next 25 years.

As a teenager, I was baffled by this move to nowhere. I couldn't figure out what my dad would do with himself in rural Pennsylvania, much less myself. But I began to understand how this urbanite, a native of New York City, with a career as a ballistics engineer with the Army's Aberdeen Proving Ground, wanted to simplify his life, get back to the earth, tend his garden, grow lots of vegetables, and live at peace with the rhythms of nature.

Remembering that Braun is the German word for brown, in a way, he went from being Walter *Braun* to Walter *Grün*, becoming a master gardener without ever taking a class. Many of his gardening practices stemmed from his engineer's desire to figure things out, as well as concerns about how to send four teenagers off to college on a government pension.

One of his first projects was to build a little greenhouse, a lean-to affair attached to the house, made from discarded windows. Benches were simple, cinderblocks and boards. Plastic gallon milk jugs filled with water were stacked against the back wall for heat storage.

In this space, he started many vegetable and flower seedlings for the garden, and grew cucumbers, lettuce and tomatoes for almost year-round harvest, the only slow time being in the dead of winter when daylight was too short to produce much of a crop.

Every container that came into the house was potentially a pot for plants: plastic beer cups, the cut-off bottoms of milk containers, Styrofoam cups, egg cartons, yogurt containers, juice cartons, and used paper cups. With a nail, he punched a hole in the bottom for drainage. He then filled these with his own homemade potting soil which was a mix of compost, garden soil, and sand. It was heavy but served its purpose.

Rather than buying flats of flowers, he potted a couple of geraniums in the fall, kept them in the greenhouse in the winter, and took cuttings in the spring. Every Memorial Day for over 25 years, geraniums graced the graves of my mom's relatives in the Boalsburg Cemetery, widely recognized as the birthplace of Memorial Day, the first celebration being held in 1864. Grave decorations were a big deal.

My dad was a devout composter, well aware that compost was the means to a healthy garden. Besides cow manure, vegetable scraps, lawn clippings, leaves, and coffee grounds were all heaped in a pile and eventually returned to the garden.

Even in rainy Pennsylvania, my dad had a rain barrel under every downspout for collecting run-off. He fashioned them from 55-gallon drums. During dry spells, he hand-watered his garden by dipping water from the barrels.

Fancy garden gadgets were rarely purchased when cast-off items would make do. To protect his newly planted tomatoes, squash, and cucumbers from frost, he fashioned little hoop houses using old snow fencing. Plastic milk jugs filled with water were set near young transplants to trap heat. Bamboo, grown in an out-of-the-way spot, was cut for use as stakes, old pantyhose for tying up tomatoes and cucumbers, and newspaper for mulch.

I'll never know if all of this was due to frugality, an ethic of not letting anything go to waste, or just plain old common sense. Whatever it was, Walter definitely had a green thumb and was living *Grün* long before anyone had ever heard of "reducing your carbon footprint."

This column was originally written in 2008 but my dad's ideas are still timely and invaluable. Thanks, dad, for inspiring me to be a sustainable gardener. And Happy Father's Day to fathers everywhere.

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