

The Art of Canning

By Dan Boyts

Living in the Ozarks at harvest time is a real treat. Most of the hard work of spring and summer gardening is over, and the fruits of our labor are ready to pick and put away. For some, that simply means giving away what they can't eat and clearing the garden spot for winter. In my family, that was a time to "put up" the harvest for winter. That meant canning. We always had a fairly large garden, and I remember picking rocks out of the one acre potato patch and then hauling burlap sacks of potatoes down the hill to be put away in the root cellar as a small child. Potatoes, tomatoes, squash, corn, and green beans were shared by the extended family of aunts, uncles, and cousins, to be eaten during the cold winter months.

My grandmother was the absolute best at getting the most green beans in a jar. Something she had learned from her mother growing up on a farm. This was done not only out of efficiency, but necessity as well. With a large family (she had seven brothers and sisters), a lightly filled jar just wouldn't go around the table. And when you have fresh canned vegetables, everybody at the table wants seconds or thirds. After working the long days that are required in farming, everyone is hungrier than people who put their days in at an office. Farming is hard work and no one knows it better than families who have been doing it for generations.

In planting a garden, planning is everything. Crops need to be rotated and given just the right amount of light and nutrition. The soil has to be worked so it is softened where plants can root easily. Plenty of space is necessary to allow room for growth. Once planted, the garden must be maintained. Weeds are removed regularly and fertilizer applied at just the right time to get a good yield, but not too much foliage. Caring and attention go a long way to a successful garden patch. Once the garden is planted, you can sit back and watch your efforts materialize before your eyes.

A friend of mine put in a garden a few years ago. He believed that he could just plant it and then sit back and watch. The ground hadn't been planted in many years and was extremely fertile. He tried to keep up with it, but the weeds became larger than the vegetables. No matter how hard he tried, once the weeds took over, he couldn't get rid of them. He didn't want to plow the corn, so the weeds grew taller than the corn. He only harvested a small portion of what the potential harvest was. The tomatoes lay on the ground and the insects and disease ruined his crop. Learning to nurture your garden takes someone with skill to teach you the right way to handle problems and grow a healthy garden.

Many people tried to match my grandmother's skill, but none were able, except me. That was because she had shared her secret with me. The secret of getting as much as you can into the small space of a glass jar. My grandmother shared many secrets of cooking with me in the time that we spent together in her kitchen, and I still remember many of them. The most special thing that she shared was how closely related gardening and canning are to life. As I reflect about our time together in the kitchen, the lessons that she taught me were not just secrets of cooking, but secrets to life. Just as in life, the more we pack into it, the more there is to go around.

My Grandmother was one of the wisest people I have ever met. She had lived a long time, or so I thought at the time. Although she did live to survive a son and into her nineties. Now I find she wasn't that old when she shared her secrets with me. I find few individuals that have the experience to equal her grasp of the human condition and true understanding of people and the world. For anyone in need, her compassion was without bounds. She would help whenever she was able, to do whatever the person asking required of her. Even when she had more to do than she could take care of, she was always available to help those in need.

Her tongue was as strong as her faith and her determination, and if you happened to get on her bad side, you'd better watch out. She could make the strongest man back down in shame, weakened by

her strength and resolve. You had best not mess with the voice of experience and reason. She wouldn't fall for a bad story or a line of bull. She knew exactly what was real and what was not. And just like my mother, who seemed to have eyes in the back of her head, her knack of knowing the truth of a situation was uncanny just as she knew the good from the bad when canning beans.

The most difficult part about canning is the preparation. It takes long hours, perseverance, hard work, and proper cleansing. You must remove any and all blemishes, bad spots, rot, bug bites or any other surface defects that might take away from the finished product. Not only will the blemish taste bad, but it spoils the final product. It looks bad too. She would remind me when we were canning that you get out of the jar what you put into it. When properly canned, I've seen beans last for many years just as fresh as the day they were put up.

I listened patiently as I watched her seasoned and deft hands break the beans in a rhythmic fashion making every break evenly and with purpose, focusing of the task at hand. Worn and wrinkled from years of digging in the dirt and nurturing the land, they worked tirelessly until the job was complete and the beans were ready for the jar. Canning was also a time for discussion. A chance to find out what was going on in the area when she canned with the neighbors, or a time to share the bits of wisdom with family. Problems were shared and solved, wounds were healed in family disputes, and health was restored to broken hearts and dreams.

The topic of the day was always discussed calmly, with wisdom from years of experience and living. Words meant to instruct and protect. Lessons from events that occurred before my birth and some before even hers, passed down to the next generation. Nostalgic reminiscences of childhood memories, when life was not as modern or easy as we find today. She talked about a time in her life when life's lessons were harsh and cruel, and listening to her stories, I thought how easy life had become, and yet

how it was the same. I could tell from her weathered face and hands that she knew what she was talking about just as I could tell from looking into her eyes the depth of her soul and her inner strength.

Canning is a long, tedious process that requires patience and perseverance. Sometimes you think it will never be over. Once you start, you can't stop or take a break. The fruit of your labor will spoil. My grandmother made this point very clear on many occasions. We finish what we start. Most things in life require this kind of determination, including the task of living itself. And while the task of living is difficult, painful, and sometimes backbreaking, we find the simple joy in small things if we approach it as a labor of love. It is not the difficult work of canning that matters, but the finished product when you are through. It becomes something that will last beyond that day and that will nourish your body and others, something of which to be proud.

She talked about her parents and grandparents and the lessons they learned and taught their children. She talked about the way the weather had changed over the last hundred years and how it affected the crops and their lives. She showed me how to tell if it was going to be a mild or harsh season by looking at the signs all around us, from the trees to the animals and insects. We talked about God and Love and how to put more of each into our lives. We talked about the faith in knowing that whatever happens is meant to be. That we can't enjoy the good times in life if we don't have the bad to compare it to. When the times are really bad, the really good times are sure to follow. We talked about how we should treat people and how they should treat us. We talked about how beautiful the world is and how we can change it for the better if we make the effort.

There never seemed to be an end to the wealth of her knowledge and her sage advice. There was never a problem that couldn't be solved by talking it over in the kitchen with my grandmother. She has been gone for many years but her voice still rings in my ear and her lessons still beat in my heart. Thinking of her smile and loving embrace, I find peace and joy. Whenever there is something bothering

me, a dilemma in my life, or a problem I need to solve, I remember the time I had with my grandmother in her kitchen talking about life and the garden, canning green beans.