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Gardening and Reading

I grew up in a house surrounded by gardens. My mother and my grandfather (who live next door to each other) both plant massive gardens each year and spend the majority of their time outside. I, however, do not share their enthusiasm. Usually I contribute to garden work by picking and washing blackberries.

I used to wonder why my mom chose to spend her time digging in dirt when she could be curled up with a book. She would always smile and say she enjoyed the outdoors.

“I like seeing things grow,” she explained to me one summer evening. “You put a seed in the ground and something comes up. You have to be in tune with nature. You nurture these plants like you nurture yourself.”

“But wouldn’t it be easier just to buy everything at the store? It would save you so much trouble.”

She looked offended at that. “It tastes better when you grow it yourself. At the store, everything is picked through, the plants have chemicals on them, and they’re picked before they’re ripe enough.”

As the summer went on, I made an effort to learn the basics of gardening from her. She always listened to me ramble on about books, so I decided to listen to her talk about her own passion. And as much as I hated to admit it, I did have fun getting my hands dirty in her garden. I found myself trying to commit her lessons to memory.

A gardener begins by preparing the garden in the final months of the year—tilling, hoeing, getting rid of weeds. The first things you can plant are onions and asparagus, usually

in mid-January. Around Valentine's Day, you can plant potatoes, kale, spinach, and snow peas. Another month, and then it's time for squash, zucchini, tomatoes, bell peppers, and jalapenos. Harvest the potatoes, asparagus, and onions in late April, and plant cantaloupe and okra in their place. Once summer begins, you can grow figs, blackberries, and—if the worms don't get them—peaches and pears. Everything finishes growing in late September, and then you can start getting the garden ready for next year.

Gardening, according to my mother, revolves around timing. Plant too soon and you risk the plants freezing, and then you have to start over. Plant too late and the heat will prevent anything from growing. You have to watch nature and pay attention to the ground. And above all, you can't force anything to grow.

Just as I grew up with gardens, I also grew up with books. I have loved reading for as long as I can remember. My dad once told me that as soon as I could walk, I would bring books (particularly *Pajama Time* and *Puppy Peek-a-Boo*) to him and coerce him into reading to me.

I consider myself lucky: I had parents who made it their mission to grow and nurture a love for books in their oldest daughter. They did so by filling our bookshelves. Even now I can remember the series that had such an impact on me: *The Magic Treehouse*, *Junie B. Jones*, *The Babysitters Club*, *Nancy Drew*. When my parents would take me to Barnes and Noble, I would run to the children's section and choose versions of classic novels written in a more undemanding format for kids. My prized possession at age ten was a simplified version of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

My love for that book paved the way to reading the actual Sherlock Holmes novels, and later to every book that Agatha Christie ever wrote. My eighth grade language arts teacher introduced me to Mark Twain and Edgar Allan Poe, and I realized that I enjoyed

classics. Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Christie's *The ABC Murders* later influenced me to become an English major.

Books, more than anything else, have the power to alter a person's life. That's one of the reasons reading has continued to captivate me. How can mere printed words move a person to laugh, cry, get angry, and close the book a different person? I think it has everything to do with timing.

During Christmas break of my freshman year of college, I read *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. I found it at just the right moment. The protagonist, Pip, gains a fortune and moves from a village to London. As someone who had just spent her first semester on her own, I could relate to the emotions and misadventures he described. The friendship between Pip and his roommate Herbert even inspired me to work through the difficulties I had with my own roommate. In short, this novel—a novel that I never expected to love—changed me in a way few books ever had. It stuck with me when I moved back to school, and it continues to stick with me three years later.

Now that I've expanded my reading to more than one or two genres, I could name several other books that had a similar impact. Most of these books came from unexpected places—from children's literature, or fantasy, or Christian fiction, all of which I had previously disregarded. And each time I've found a life-altering book, it was exactly what I needed. Just as there comes an ideal time for certain plants to grow, there also comes an ideal time to read certain books. In a garden, the dirt has been prepared for the seed to take root. In a reader, the mind has been prepared for ideas to take root.

In a few months I will graduate with a degree in English, and the trail of how I got here is only now becoming clear to me. It began with a passion for words and a longing for adventure. Gradually I had my mind opened. My parents inspired me to read books that would challenge me and change me. They planted the seeds for my love of books by reading

to me as a child, they nourished this love by helping me collect a small library, and they grew this love into fruition by encouraging me to study English.

My oldest cousin has a two-year-old daughter who loves having people read to her. Like the good cousin I intend to be, I read to her and collect books to give as gifts. I know I can't force a love of reading to grow, but I can certainly plant the seeds.