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Jen's Story on Gardening and Abundance

My great grandmother gardened out of necessity. She may have enjoyed the smell of freshly tilled earth and the feeling of burning sun on the back of her neck, I don't know. She transformed her large Missouri yard into a small farm out of a need to feed her family of eight. Her own parents were institutionalized when she was a child. She was separated from her siblings and farmed out to relatives, spreading out the burden of mouths to feed. She knew what it was to go hungry.

My grandmother was born in the 1930s, her mother's second child. The Great Depression was a time of hunger, not because there was too little food, but because it was too expensive to harvest the food in the fields. This information shocked me when I was young. Food was left to rot while

people went without. My great grandmother fed every person who came to her porch in need during the 1930s and '40s. She did what she could from her personal harvest.

The women in my family have had the urge to feed with each successive generation. The need for extra food passed down in the genes with wide hips and a love for butter. Gardens became a family tradition, though we moved from the Ozarks, to the Central Valley of California, to the rolling green of Central Oregon. My grandmother grew walnuts and avocados. My mother nurtured cherries and tomatoes. My sister arrives at gatherings with armloads of lettuce and cucumbers from her yard during growing season.

Gardens are the difference between enough and abundance. They force you to choose between sharing with your community and watching food go to waste. In high school, friends would come over to study and leave with bags of deep red cherries still warm from the sun.

I was never conscious of not having enough as a child. There was always food. There were treats that tasted of soil and the delta breeze. My parents fought over debt, borrowed money from grandparents to fix the water heater, the air conditioner and the car, my mother took a second job cleaning houses—but there were enough fresh strawberries to stain your lips red.

For the past two years, I have worked in a drop-in center feeding young people who are experiencing homelessness. Individuals come to us with varying levels of trauma and hunger. They arrive with stories of poverty and struggle and I know that they are hungry not because there isn't enough, but because it is cheaper to let food go to waste.

I live in an apartment. I have no garden. I grow no pears, hazelnuts, or beets. I am lucky to be able to help direct others' abundance to those in need.