

Grafton County's 4-H Gardeners
By Arianne Fosdick

“So friends, every day do something that will not compute.”
Wendell Berry, from his poem *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*

This line from small farm advocate, writer, and teacher Wendell Berry has stuck with me lately. I see so much computing in our days; everything adds up (or doesn't), looks good on your resume, or earns you frequent flyer miles. There are certainly advantages to all of these immediate, tangible results, but I would agree with Wendell Berry that there is something profoundly important in those things that do not always compute, in those actions and gestures that are not necessarily seen or recognized.

Gardening in general is one of those things that does not always compute. There are so many variables to wrestle with—weather, soil, diseases like this year's Late Blight—and our supermarkets are so well stocked with every vegetable at any time of year, that you might feel foolish putting off BLT night for that last green tomato to ripen or frantically cooking, cutting and putting up something that already lines the grocery store shelves. You might look longingly at the tubs of factory made pesto. You might toy with the idea of planting perennials rather than potatoes. But somewhere in your mind and heart you know that growing a garden is important.

I cite the 4-H Gardening Program as a specific example of doing something for the pure sake of doing it. Gardening is perpetually challenging. For beginner gardeners of any age the mistakes often outweigh the victories. It may take years to trust the spacing recommended on the seed packet or to actually consider the days to maturity of those seedlings that you so eagerly plant on the first warm day in April. No one escapes these trials and errors and very few gardeners actually brag about their first vegetable gardens. As one of the facilitators and judges of the 4-H Garden Program I have the honor of bearing witness to these very first gardens of people who may or may not make a lifelong hobby of it. I drive down back roads to find small back yard plots in where such miracles as carrots, beets, and lettuce have been convinced to take root. I stand beside kids of all ages, scoring with a simple, generic system the complex formula of risk, hope, and work involved in their garden. They smile bravely as I poke and prod their soil, searching for pest damage and forgotten tools (5 points if you've put all your tools away). They explain apologetically how their first two plantings of carrots were washed out by the rain or how their sunflower tops mysteriously disappeared over night. Despite what didn't thrive, or, in some cases survive at all, most of these kids will sign up for the program again next spring.

My position at the Grafton County Cooperative Extension allows me to work with both child and adult gardeners, and I can't help but to occasionally compare the two. Most of the adults talk about some sort of gardening experiences as children, and though they have gained much in the way of experience and knowledge, they may have traded some of their bravery and openness in the bargain. This observation comes directly from my experience of trying to set up a much requested garden tour as part of our 2009 summer gardening lecture series. Every gardener I met delighted in the idea of visiting someone else's garden, but not more than two people were agreeable to having their garden as part of the tour. “Your garden doesn't have to be perfect” I would say, to no avail. I haven't quite given up on the idea, but I can't help but wonder if somewhere along the line of “growing up” we start to shy away from what may not compute. We expect more for our efforts and forgive fewer of our mistakes.

I marvel at the 4-H gardeners who tour me through their garden no matter what state we might find it in. I marvel that despite all the computing that is involved, the deadlines, the score sheets, and the ribbons, standing firmly at the heart of this program is a six-year-old holding a handful of the beans he has grown. And beside this six-year-old is a family that took the suggestions they were given last year—did the soil test, added the manure, used mulch to keep the weeds down—and improved their garden ten-fold.

My kudos go out to all of our Grafton County 4-H Garden Program participants. To the rest of us who are a little too careful, a little too concerned, I chime in with Wendell Berry to say do something

every day that does not compute. Turn a cartwheel that no one will see, write a poem that no one will read, and smile widely in the face of what is not explicitly perfect, exceptionally productive, or especially public.

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