

Relishing Summer Days

Drifting between sleep and semi-awareness, my mind is as foggy as the grayness outside the window that has softly wrapped itself around the house. The quiet of the morning is interrupted by the crowd of birds at the feeder outside my bedroom window, their chirping serving as a gentle alarm clock reminding me I have plenty to do this morning.

The aromas of my husband's French toast and steaming coffee add to the warmth of the fire already crackling in the woodstove; and when I pad down the stairs, I note that the scene is perfectly set for a cozy day of wrapping gifts for the holidays. Presents for friends and family have all been secured, even though no mobs have been fended off, no stores have been entered, no catalog companies have been called. All I need to do is head to the cool, dark storeroom in the basement and pull out the cases of preserves, made from the riches of our garden, that were put up during the summer and earlier in the autumn.

After several trips up and down the steep, narrow staircase, my treasures are laid out before me: strawberry jam chock full of fruit jewels; jars of regal purple wild grape jelly; ruby-hued jam and garnet jelly from the raspberries; and finally, the relishes, the vegetable kaleidoscopes chock full of the glorious days of summer! As I begin the wrapping process, carefully cradling each jar in paper, I reflect back on one of those wonderful, rewarding mornings that yielded the parcels I so happily pack today.

It is Saturday, and my plans for the day have been anticipated for some time now. To begin, from the back of the cavernous hutch cupboard I unearth the biggest bowls I own, emptying them of the assorted paraphernalia that had tumbled into and accumulated in them over the course of the winter. Now they are to be employed in a far worthier cause: the collection of garden vegetables for farm-fresh relish.

With an armload of containers in assorted shapes and colors, I reflect my ambition in the number I carry out to the garden. My spirits soar at the thought of transforming the bright produce from beautiful, living ornaments into fragrant, colorful condiments to be savored throughout the year. Although

the sun has just barely dried and warmed the grass, with bare feet I set out for the garden, eager to get a start on the day's project.

The jumble of basins is left just inside the garden gate, and I grab the largest and head past the confusion of feathery cosmos and bushy zinnias to the pepper patch. There are still plenty of green pepper "wannabes" hidden in the foliage, each one dark and glossy and holding, in the sunny tints starting to emerge from the deep emerald, the promise of sweeter things to come. I bypass these, knowing my patience will be rewarded once they've fully matured and been transformed into the lemon-, oriole-, and lipstick-shaded peppers I now gather. Quickly my bowl is filled with the gems, and I contentedly carry them back to the gait and exchange them for an empty bowl with which to prowl the zucchini and summer squash beds.

It was only the other evening that a tender, delicate squash at the end of the plot was marginally of eating size, so it was left for another couple of days of sunbathing. Today it has more in common with a baseball bat than with something that belongs on the kitchen table, yet I pick it anyway, figuring it will be the foundation for two or three—or a couple of dozen(!) loaves of zucchini bread. Farther down the row are the modest squashes I seek, and because of their number, I can afford to select the uniformly shaped, which will make their dicing go a bit more quickly.

Passing by the tomato bed, I can't resist the temptation to plop a couple of cherry tomatoes into my mouth. The flavor bursts from the fire-engine red orbs, exploding in my mouth. Some have their sweetness warmed by the climbing sun, while those hidden by the dense foliage offer a refreshing coolness. Pop! Pop! With chipmunk cheeks that make a smile a challenge, I reluctantly leave this cheery breakfast to scope out the cucumbers. Taking dainty steps a ballerina would admire, I tiptoe through the jungle of vines, careful to avoid the winter squashes and cucumbers that grow hidden in the tangle of this untamed part of the garden. I chuckle as each cuke is placed in the basket, recalling how I never ate a cucumber until I had my own garden and my husband insisted we plant some. As a kid, their green skins with the little nubbins always reminded me of frogs! Definitely a food to avoid back then!

To the onion patch I next head, and I must admit I am a bit reluctant to disrupt the orderly regiment of onions standing upright and tall like soldiers in formation. For a second, I deliberate as to whether to make my selections based on size and readiness, or if I should maintain the pleasing lines of the regal stalks reaching skyward. Design overrules common sense to the extent that I pick to maintain the tidy rows, and my sense of color requests that I choose purple onions over white when I gently coax the bulbs from soil reluctant to release its charges.

After two trips, back to the house, I am able to deposit the full extent of my bounty on the kitchen's huge maple island that last night, in preparation for today, was cleared of catalogs, magazines, mail, and errant papers. Colanders and kettles, cutting boards, measuring cups, saucepans and seasonings are all ready, and the chopping, cubing, cutting, dicing, and slicing begin. Quickly, it seems as though the vast expanse of countertop is suddenly crammed with what surely must be every bowl I own!

A spread for the eyes! A feast for the palette! A banquet for the nose! Bowls are filled with the bright chopped vegetables, and with delight I measure the appropriate portions of each to be mixed. Plunging my hands into the oversized basin, I mix with my fingers the wonderful concoction of warm and cool, soft and firm, aromatic vegetable confetti. How I love those colorful chunks, shimmering in the sun and filling the house with their wonderful aroma. By now the earthy perfume has permeated the kitchen and has even wafted outside through the open windows and doors!

Mornings like this are a gift and a blessing, and the wealth spread before me asks that I acknowledge it and give thanks. Before the cooking and canning processes begin, I express my gratitude then savor this moment, trying to capture and store each and every impression my senses have absorbed. And I know that on a charcoal autumn day, just a few turnings of the calendar pages away, I will be able to recall and relive this magic day!