Workin' Weeds

There's no better way to work out a worry than by sweating over a good patch of weeds.

By Susan Sarver

I'd say my dad's vegetable garden was as big as a football field, but that couldn't be right. It was more like a soccer field. As huge as it was, though, it was never quite big enough, so every spring Dad let the tiller nibble an extra furrow from the lawn. I'd always imagined he did this for a single, practical reason: to satisfy the perpetual appetites of five children. It wasn't until I married and had two children of my own that I figured out the real purpose of such a large garden. It wasn't the need for more vegetables, it was a need for more weeds.

All five of Dad's children were born "deep feelers." We worried and wondered over the most common things and the most outrageous possibilities. My brothers worried about making the Little League all-star team. My sister wondered whether little Bobby had a crush on her or was just faking nice because she had a new puppy. I worried about everything from the nature of infinity to whether I was up against the work of Sarah Jane or Sarah Jane's mother at the 4-H fair. Brother Joe even fretted over the possibility of the birds doing in his catalpa-worm business.

When there were no acute worries, one of us would conjure up an enormous ponderable, such as how and when the world might end or what might be left of it by the time we were grown-ups. We were downright gifted when it came to turning crevices into canyons, and no psychotherapist in the land could have lured our worries away from us.

Dad grew up a farm boy and believed that the only way to flush a worry out into the open was by plenty of sweat. He considered hard, honest, physical work the noblest enterprise on earth. According to Dad's philosophy, only the juices of physical labor could lubricate the mind enough to separate life's dilemmas into manageable chunks.

Dad could read signs of trouble on our faces. "The garden needs weedin'," he'd say. "You go out and get started and I'll be out in a little bit." Sure enough, he'd come and join us just about the time we'd weeded enough to begin talking about whatever was troubling us. As we talked, we'd yank up weeds and toss them aside as though they were little conquered fragments of our concerns.

My dad discovered that weeds could whittle away more than worries. A few of us children were prone to quick flares of temper. Pulling up a warm patch of weeds on a hot afternoon was one of the fastest ways to simmer down a streak of fury.

The weeds worked equally well for choking out the bickering and battling that increased immensely during the summer months. Mother believed that vegetables eased tensions nearly as well. Even Dad found them favorable when the weeds ran short. Picking and shelling a few rows of peas with the enemy was enough to prompt a solid truce that would last at least until the next batch of beans stretched to picking length.

Tomatoes were another story. Feuding siblings were never sent to the tomato patch. Put a couple of irascible children there and they were bound to seek out the most rotten, bug-filled tomatoes-turned-weapons—and there was no better target for a mushy tomato than the upturned bottom of a fellow feudling. Mom made this mistake only once.

During the weedless winter months, we might have succumbed to the weight of our worries had Dad not come up with a supply of able substitutes to tide us over until the genuine articles appeared in the spring. In the backyard, for example, he kept a large pile of bricks, which he claimed he would one day form into lampposts. For some reason that brick pile always seemed to be in the way of a growing bush or the basketball hoop or the place where the storage shed should have been.

Quite suspiciously, the mountain of firewood Dad had

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delivered every year faced the same fate. No matter where we stacked it, now and again its placement called for a major shuffle. The only difference between the woodpile and the brick pile was that there was more wood to go around. As we set out to conquer the task of relocating the woodpile, not only did we forget about what had ruffled us in the first place, but a solidarity developed inspired by the injustice of our common sentence.

Eventually Dad grew concerned that our garden's prolific patch of weeds might prove insufficient to match the mounting worries of my two high-school-aged brothers, and his eyes began to survey the fields that belonged to a nearby farmer. The farmer, Dad had discovered, had a crop of weeds so hardy that it threatened to choke his field out of soybeans. It so happened that he was looking for a couple of young weeders to work up and down the rows with machetes.

That conversation elevated the image of weeds for all of us forever, transforming them into the green gold on which my brothers grew rich. Although I begged for a chance to whack my fair share, my mother wouldn't hear of one of her daughters sweating over a machete. I watched my brothers' bank accounts grow like the muscles in their arms. And though I envied them, I tried not to show it, as I knew where I'd be headed if my face bore evidence of my feelings.

These days I watch the faces of my own children as they grow increasingly concerned over their world's imperfections. Along with the day-to-day dilemmas of childhood, they've begun to assume the bigger burdens of the environment, the homeless, and violence. They wonder how we've allowed the rare treasure of our earth to slip into disrepair, and they worry about how we're going to restore it. I know that it would help to have a common ground—a weed patch—in which to work our worries over.

As a reluctant suburbanite, I look at my lilliputian lot with its too tidy, too mulched, too weedless patch of garden, knowing I can barely break enough sweat over it to dilute even a small concern. But we do the best we can through the year, and every summer we pack up our worries and haul them 300 miles to Dad's garden. It's the one place in the world I can count on—the one place where we stand a chance of working out our worries before we run out of weeds.

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spections free of charge; some charge between $50 and $150. The cost of ridding a house of subterranean termites is based on house size and local competition among exterminators and usually ranges from between $300 to $1,000.

The most effective extermination method known at present is to poison the soil with a termiticide before a house is built. To rid an existing house of the pests, a termiticide is pumped alongside and around the foundation's perimeter and beneath the foundation slab, laying down a contiguous barrier.

Most reputable companies will guarantee their treatment for one year. Usually, you may renew the guarantee each year, for up to five years, for 10 to 15 percent of the original cost per year. A few top firms permit you to renew the guarantee each year for the life of the house. Moreover, the guarantee is transferable when the house is sold.

Drywood Termites

Drywood termites are eliminated by fumigating the entire house. You and your family and pets must vacate the premises for at least 24 hours. A tarp is stretched over the house and drawn tight. Then a gas poisonous only to termites is pumped in and allowed to stay long enough to kill the pests. The cost generally runs between $1,000 and $1,500.

According to urban entomologist Herb Field, the technical director of Lloyd Pest Control, in San Diego, Calif., when the process is completed and the tarp is removed, it's perfectly safe for you to return and resume your life. "You don't even need to wash the dishes," he says.

Unfortunately, since no gas residue remains, a new army of drywood termites can begin building nests. Generally, though, it takes five to six years for a colony to regroup, according to Field.

Carpenter Ants

A direct attack with chemical spray on typically small carpenter ant colonies in structural wood members is the standard professional approach to eliminating this menace. The cost is generally less than that for knocking out termites. Finding the ant colonies takes the same expertise demanded for locating termites.

Is there yet another way to eliminate wood eaters? With tongue in cheek, one entomologist said, "Sure, you could import an African aardvark. There's an animal with a voracious appetite for termites and ants of all kinds. Of course, when the animal ran out of its favorite food, you'd have to provide new bugs. That might be kind of self-defeating."

KIDS IN THE COUNTRY

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"What's that smell?" she responded.

"Jobs," I said.

"What? Look at you, you're soaking wet!"

"I ate a bunch of poison berries."

"What!"

Cousin Clara smiled. "Did Billy tell you that?"

"And I drank cow water."

"Or was it your father?" Mom piped in suspiciously.

I'd had plenty for one day. I lived to brag about driving the tractor, I saw my first firefly, and I even slept that night, despite overhearing Dad say, "Most of these old farmhouses are haunted ya know."

When it came time to leave, we gathered to say our good-byes, but Dad was strangely absent. Cousin Billy smiled that funny smile again, handed Mom two bags of fresh-picked sweet corn, then winked at us, pointing to the cornfield. Bent among the tall late-August stalks was Dad, clandestinely loading a grocery bag with corn. Mortified, Mom wanted to stop him, but Cousin Billy said, "Let him finish first—he's pickin' cattle corn." I smiled, feeling even smarter than Dad.

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