

Gardening

Fiction • Michael Peeler

Yards are an incredible thing. The average apartment dweller will never understand the joy of clearing a patch in your empty yard for a small vegetable garden, tilling the ground to plant your fifteen little tomato plants, working through the spring to keep them well watered and protected with the cages that guide their short, striving stems upwards, weeding and making sure that the tiny plants grow just right; the joy that comes from seeing the happy yellow of your first flowers on the plant, your first adorable bud, your first cheery little green tomato starting to appear; the excitement as that first tomato of the season starts turning yellow as you check them each day, then orange, and finally red, until it's bright enough for you to pick it, take it inside, slice it up, and make a perfect tomato sandwich with a toasted piece of bread, the right amount of mayo, a sprinkle of salt and pepper, and tasting the fruit of your own labor; and then going out the next day, and picking two more, and then having more tomatoes, several more ripening each day, until you realize the first week has ended and you're getting eight tomatoes a day, and not even you, with all your love of tomatoes, could actually eat them at that fast of a frequency, but they're your tomatoes that you've spent this long harvesting, so you obviously don't want them to go to waste, and you need to start finding more uses for the tomatoes, so you start trying to make tomato sauce from scratch, though the fresh tomatoes mean it's way wetter and more skin-filled than when you use the normal peeled and canned stuff, so you need to invest in an immersion blender or something to help make it more edible, and even then it's still tomatoes and

you're still having to eat them and you really need to get someone else to help with this, so you invite all your family in the area over for a big Italian dinner, and everyone is so proud of your tomatoes and the work you put into growing them, and you send everyone home with the tomatoes you picked that day and the leftover sauce, and then since you've already had spaghetti the night before, you expand into other things like salsa and caprese salad, even though you're starting to get a bit sick of tomatoes and your acid reflux is acting up again, so ultimately you decide to go ahead and start sharing the tomatoes with your neighbors, who are very happy to be receiving them, and tell you how much they like tomatoes and are happy that you're sharing your hard work with them, except you notice that each day they seem to be getting less and less enthusiastic about the tomatoes because you just keep coming back with them again and again and they, too, start getting worried about how many tomatoes you're sharing and they become less and less happy to see you each day, so that by the third week after you got your first tomato they won't really open their doors when you come by and they intentionally avoid eye contact with you when you walk past, but you still have tomatoes you need to share and you have to keep trying to pawn them off to people and eating them yourself but the acid is really starting to aggravate your esophagus but damnit you put in the work for these, you grew them from scratch, you're not just going to start wasting them, and now you're a month in and some of the plants are starting to get yellow leaves and you're secretly getting a bit hopeful that it's almost the end of the season but you're still seeing a bunch of unripe tomatoes and still getting so many new, ripe tomatoes every day that by this point the only thing you're really eating is tomatoes, your tomato sandwiches have a tomato in the middle with two slices of tomato instead of bread, and tomato seeds instead of salt and pepper and tomato sauce instead of mayo, and is it just your imagination or are your teeth starting to look red, and you've still got two dozen tomatoes on your counter so you really need to figure out how to eat a couple more every day or else find something new to do with them so you eventually decide you'll get mason jars and start canning some of them, and making some canned salsa, and keep it for the rest of the winter, which will let you put off the obligation by accepting this cruel barter of a lengthening of your sentence, so you invest the six hours in the weekend you have off from work to buy mason jars from the store, to sterilize them in boiling

water, to blanch the tomatoes so their skins will come off easier, to chop up the tomatoes and peppers and onion, make the salsa, pour it into the cans, seal the jars in boiling water – except you’ve gotten even more tomatoes that day that you didn’t take into account so you don’t have enough jars so you’re going to have to eat some of the salsa, and you still have tomatoes left, too, and by this point it’s cost you hundreds of dollars; between plants, cages, fertilizer, insecticides, the blender, jars, canning material, as well as the immaterial costs of ruining any relationships with your neighbors and family and anyone who you will ever try to smile at, and all the eventual costs from the medical bills your overconsumption of very acidic tomatoes over the past month will eventually bring about, and you’re well and truly sick of tomatoes, so you almost shout with joy when 6 weeks after the first tomato you realize that there are no more little green baby tomatoes left on the plants, no more budding monstrosities, no more flowers signaling some coming curse-to-be, only varying shades of yellow and orange and red, so this is only going to go on for a little while longer, and so you sprint to the finish line, not quite happily but dutifully and proudly eating your tomatoes every day, each day picking fewer, each day the end drawing nearer, each moment leading you closer to freedom, until finally you realize that the day has come and you’ve picked what seems to be the last tomato left on the plants, and you eat it, and you weep, weep with joy, because thank God it’s finally over, thank God you’ve been successful, thank God you’ve proven your worth, thank God you’ve eaten them all, thank God you’ve shown that you can conquer nature, and then the next year looking at how empty your yard is, and recalling how much you liked gardening, and gosh, tomatoes are quite good, and deciding to do it all again.