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Backyard Bounty

Tending his fruit and vegetable garden, the author's 90-year-old father—a locavore before the term existed—keeps old country ways alive.

Posted May 9, 2011 by [Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco](#)

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Rosario Castronovo tends his garden at his home on a corner lot in North Bergen.

Photo by Colin Archer/Agency New Jersey.



Castronovo (right) with an Italian Army comrade in Novi Ligure, Italy, 1943, before he was interned in a German prisoner-of-war camp following Italy's surrender.



Mary Anne Castronovo Fusco with her father. She first assisted him in his garden at age 10. These days she drives him to shop for seeds.

Photo by Colin Archer/Agency New Jersey.

Lo-ca-vore (noun): One who eats foods grown locally whenever possible. First known use: 2005.

My father, Rosario Castronovo, who turns 90 the Sunday after Father's Day, has been a locavore all his life. And the vest-pocket garden behind his North Bergen home, where not a blade of grass is permitted to grow, is his Fountain of Youth. Dad's idea of recreation isn't lounging on a lawn; it's digging, sowing, watering, weeding and harvesting the fruits—and vegetables—of his labors.

He cultivated a taste for fresh seasonal flavors in his native Sicily, where he watched his father tend his lemon orchards and helped care for the vegetables he'd hawk before going to school. From the grandmother who raised him after the death of his mother, he learned how to turn cauliflower, broccoli and even tenerumi (tender Sicilian squash leaves) into simple yet savory sustenance. Trained as a wood carver, he ultimately earned his living on this side of the Atlantic as a commercial painter, working on everything from boiler rooms to penthouses. He says that he cried like a baby the day he reluctantly retired at age 69. True to his roots, he has never stopped working, and his bond with the earth has sustained him in good times and bad.

A conscripted soldier in Mussolini's army, my father was blessed never to have seen combat. He did, however, have the misfortune of being rounded up by the Germans after Italy signed its armistice with the Allies in 1943. Railroaded to a processing center on the Baltic, he was asked, "What did you do as a civilian?" "Contadino," he said—farm worker. Thus, he spent the warmer seasons of his two-year captivity near Dresden away from Stalag IVB and in the countryside, guarding cherry orchards (and filching his fill of the ripe fruit), gathering potatoes and cooking for his fellow prisoners—tasks that nourished his body and spirit.

Leaving the postwar devastation of Europe for the opportunity to better feed his young family, he, along with my mother, toiled long hours—in Venezuela before settling in Hudson County—to buy a home. Dad planted a row of tomatoes and a small patch of other vegetables the spring after we moved in. All of 10, I helped him harvest his first crop that summer. Over the years, he expanded his repertoire of plantings. Even when paesani—seeking to distance themselves from the ways of the old world—disparaged plots like his as "guinea gardens," he stuck with his avocation. He even established satellite gardens at my sister's house and mine.

Now that the White House has its own vest-pocket garden, growing one's own food has received an official seal of approval. But to Dad it has always been common sense. Doesn't everyone know that only freshly picked eggplants won't soak up too much oil when you fry them?

Fresh tomatoes mean just one thing to him: those from his own backyard, where a good yield will ensure, thanks to my mother's canning skills, enough sauce to last till the following spring. The rest of his 375-square-foot domain is devoted to other prolific crops, like bell peppers, zucchini, cucumbers and basil. There's no garlic; however, Dad can't stomach it. He doesn't bother with grapes either, because no table varieties that grow here could ever compare to the ones he grew up with; anyway, he'd rather have a glass of beer or shot of Chivas than a glass of homemade wine.

He does tend a pair of fig trees—one black, one white—which render small but honey-sweet fruit, plus cuttings he gives to friends and relatives who'd like to grow their own. When nature cooperates, his apricot tree, which sprang from a pit tossed into the ground of his concrete-edged Eden, carpets the patio with snowy petals in spring and fills baskets with sunny fruit in summer. It shades a forlorn strip that Dad yielded along

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without disrupting the plants.

Dad gives away his squash blossoms to the restaurateur across the street and lately has taken to growing butternuts (which he does not eat), just because he likes the way the gourds dangle like big beige bells from the clothesline he rigged to support their vines. Though fertile, his garden is not what most would call pretty, and my mother is its fiercest critic. She describes it as a *circulo equestre*, the Sicilian term for circus, as in, way too much going on.

Dad has always started some of his own vegetables from seed but isn't an heirloom snob. He does, however, shop for seedlings at local nurseries with the same intensity that I presume other men exhibit when selecting golf balls. We've forged a precious bond during those outings, bickering over which fertilizer to buy and commiserating over the "new and improved" rose bushes that don't bloom in perfumed profusion like his 45-year-old shrubs do. Family vacations have always included side trips in search of local produce—peaches down the Shore, cactus pears in California, loquats in Italy. Turned off by the gummy rolls sold as Italian bread in Florida markets, with me as his designated driver, he even tracked down crusty, sesame-dotted loaves made by a transplanted New Jersey baker on the Gulf Coast.

Not all seasons have been good ones. In the spring of 1970, Dad fell seriously ill with lymphoma. It kept him off his beloved job for six months, but he grew strong enough to plant his garden the following spring and walk my sister down the aisle on his 50th birthday that June.

The autumn of '98 was marred by a prostate-cancer diagnosis. Dad's first course of therapy was to take my sons apple and pumpkin picking. To distract him from his radiation regimen, I started bringing him along on farm assignments for the food column I was writing. The guys in the field instantly embraced him as one of their own. Sure, they'd sell him a box of fennel, cardoons or plums—oh, and did he happen to have any seeds for cucuzza, that long Italian squash that fetches a nice price at the Union Square Greenmarket? (He did.)

In August 2005, Dad had a heart attack. The next spring, I proposed hiring some landscapers to till his soil. He didn't speak to me the rest of the day. When I visited him that weekend, the dirt in his yard had been turned and raked into uniform furrows. "I did it a little at a time," he said. He's been working his trio of gardens and doing other chores a little at a time ever since—but not always without incident.

"Hide his ladder," said the cardiologist when I told him Dad was still climbing to the second story to do his own repairs. So I sequestered his extension ladder at my house, unaware that he had another, shorter one. Last fall, he used it to insert himself amid the prickly branches of his apricot tree to prune it, straining his arm in the process.

"Couldn't you have called one of us to help you?" I chided. But that would've involved waiting, and patience is not one of Dad's virtues. To every thing there may be a season, but Dad, who still rises at 5 am, lives by the motto, "Chi ha tempo non aspetti tempo"—an Italianate, "There's no time like the present." And he bristles when others don't adhere to his own strict timetable.

Last summer, he was miffed that our respective schedules (he and my mother help care for their five great-grandchildren, age 4 and under) kept us from taking even one farm excursion. But I will make it up to him this season. The local cherries should be ripening soon, just in time for Father's Day.

A writer and contributor who lives in Leonia, Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco is working on a children's book about a vest-pocket garden. She wrote about mispronunciation of Italian menu words in the February issue. Her website is macfusco.com.

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COMMENTS

I want to shop in his garden!

Thanks so much for the beautiful story. I grew up with a dad who always had a huge garden - we didn't know people bought things like squash and potatoes from stores until we were out of the house! We laugh now that "composting" is the thing to do - my dad did it back in the 70s - so that we had some quality fertilizer for his garden, of course!

Posted by: Kathy Cowie, Ridgewood | May 23, 2011 22:03:34 PM |

Backyard Bounty

What a beautiful and well-written story. What is old is now new again and home gardening is enjoying a well-deserved encore. I particularly enjoyed the multi-generational piece of this article. Five great grandchildren...God Bless!

Posted by: Karen Smaldone, Manhasset, NY | May 23, 2011 23:09:23 PM |

Backyard Bounty

My daughter, Kathy Cowie, sent me this article, which brings back wonderful memories for me as well. With five children to help my husband, the garden thrived. Since he grew up in the city, without a yard, my husband George, discovered his love for gardening, as well as his talent.

I believe that my children love fresh vegetables because, they grew up with them!

Posted by: Backyard Bounty, Chester | May 24, 2011 18:22:26 PM |

Backyard Bounty

What a wonderful celebration of a father's life, just in time for Father's Day. This story makes me want to start digging in my own garden.

Posted by: Ann Malaspina, Ridgewood | May 31, 2011 13:45:27 PM |

Backyard Garden

Wonderful story - I did not want it to end! I remember eating vegetables from our garden. Nothing ever tastes as good as home grown.

Posted by: Michelle Daly, Paramus | Jun 02, 2011 13:32:36 PM |

Backyard Bounty

God Bless Rosario! What a terrific story about a man and father who is still very active and has survived many things in his lifetime.

Posted by: Linda Golba, Paramus | Jun 02, 2011 13:38:54 PM |

Backyard Bounty

Thanks, Mary Ann, for sharing your family--your father, his garden, everything with us. It really touched a chord as my father's love of gardening is something I am thrilled to have inherited and I treasure the memories I have of him in his garden.

Thanks for the reminder too that I've got to get out there and get the vegetables in the ground!

Posted by: emily, Clifton | Jun 09, 2011 21:14:29 PM |

Backyard Bounty

What a refreshing article when almost everything you read or hear today deals with chemically bombarded or contaminated fruits, vegetables, meat, poultry, fish etc.! Nothing seems to be safe or sacred not even baby formula, food, furniture or toys. It was touching reading about the author's father, Rosario, as a pioneer dedicated locavore adhering to his family roots and childhood experiences in Sicily. He is determined to be passionate in the nurturing of his garden with such care and devotion so as to assure himself that he is doing his best to provide fresh and wholesome food for his family. He has made his garden an integral part of his life. The fact that he continues to tend his garden at the age of ninety is a result of his efforts and a lesson for us all.

Posted by: Dolores M. Fabiano, Union City | Jun 22, 2011 18:14:31 PM |

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