

Rita and I recently took our gardening experiences to a new level. With such a statement, one might think we constructed raised bed gardens or began some other major venture. Such was not the case. This past week, we simply discovered that sometimes the simplest of activities achieve the most satisfying results.

In the spring, we like most gardeners, get all excited about growing our own vegetables. Four months of cold, ice and snow, certainly help to generate this enthusiasm.

In mid-April, while it was still blustery and cold outdoors, I had thoughts of eating a fresh, red, garden-ripened tomato. Eagerly, I started our tomatoes from seed. There, in the warmth of our basement, in small trays of potting soil and under grow lights, I planted two packages of tomato seeds. With great anticipation, I awaited the arrival of new seedlings. In two weeks, fragile little plants began to emerge. Ten days later they had developed their first sets of true leaves, an indication that it was time to transplant them to individual pots.

Typically, a package includes 25 to 30 seeds. I had great success with nearly 100% germination. When it comes to transplanting small seedlings, I usually call upon the dexterity of Rita to help. I fill the flower pots with potting soil while she lifts and transplants the tiny seedlings. Having potted a dozen, I suggested we destroy the balance; however, being the considerate husband that I am, and due to Rita's persuasiveness, we transplanted the entire bunch. When we finished, we had over four dozen potted tomato plants.

I assumed a few of the transplants would not survive. However, after four to five weeks of tender loving care, all were still growing and had reached the size where they were ready to be transplanted to the garden. All we needed to do was to harden them off. Each day for the next week we carried the plants outdoors to a safe location on the deck, away from direct sunlight and strong winds, and each evening we carried them back indoors.

During this process, I suggested we start giving away tomato plants. I even carried a tray of plants to the office and pawned off a number to my colleagues. Rita planted a few in large containers that we gave away to family members for Father's Day.

We didn't have the heart to destroy any of the remaining plants, thus sixteen made their way to our garden. Patiently, we waited to pick that first red, garden-ripened tomato. Then it began. With sixteen prolific tomato plants, we soon had more tomatoes than we could eat. Rita circled the neighborhood giving away tomatoes. With piles of them accumulating in our laundry room, something had to be done.

We decided to try canning tomatoes. Even though we both watched our mothers can, neither of us had experience canning anything. Off to the store we went. There we

purchased a water bath canner, jars, lids, rings, a jar lifter, a funnel, and other little doodads needed to make canning easier. After searching the internet for recipes and consulting with my colleagues, we embarked on our tomato canning adventure.

Two nights later, with tomato-splattered shirts and a sticky kitchen floor, we were the proud owners of fourteen quarts of tomatoes and tomato juice. Even though they cost much more than we'd pay in the store, the satisfaction we both felt when the jars sealed made all the mess worth it. And the good news is we made use of nearly fifty pounds of tomatoes. Mother would be proud.

