



Historic Hill Country Gardens

by Joe Herring

As the days grow warmer, and the trees have start to bud, I begin to wonder about historic gardens here in Kerr County, how they used to be planted, and what types of plants people chose back in the earlier part of the last century.

Often, when I want to know how daily life went on during those early days, I turn to a little volume called “Hill Country Boy,” written in the mid-1970’s by Herbert E. Oehler. Although the book is thin, it is rich in stories about this place.

The Oehlers had a farm on Johnson Creek, between Ingram and Mountain Home at the dawn of the past century. Here is how Herbert Oehler described his family’s circa-1900 garden:

“An acre or more of ground was always set aside for the vegetable garden,” Mr. Oehler wrote. “This was mostly under Mama’s direction and she decided what and how much of each kind of vegetable was planted.”

An acre is a lot of garden to take care of. Remember, then that this was not ‘hobby gardening,’ as most of us practice today: this was gardening in earnest, professional gardening. The Oehlers planned not only to live on the produce of that garden, but also to have a little extra to sell to earn some needed cash.

The physical work required to survive in those days, on a farm between Ingram and Mountain Home, would produce large appetites, and there were nine in the family. So an acre was just enough, and there were times, I’m sure, when they wished they’d planted more.

In one way, they were lucky, because their land was irrigated by a clever use of the nearby Johnson Creek.

“There were always several rows of beans, both bush and pole. Pole beans required extra work because when the vines began to reach out, wooden poles had to be stuck into

the ground for them to climb on. Slender cedar or willow limbs about eight feet long were cut and these poles were sharpened to a point and pushed into the ground beside one of the bean bushes. Two poles from one row were brought together at the top with two poles from another row and tied with a piece of string or baling wire. When the vines climbed to the top, the bean patch resembled rows of little green Indian tepees.

“Besides the tomatoes, potatoes and beans, there were radishes, cucumbers, squash, Irish potatoes, cabbage, musk melons, water melons, cushaws, okra, beets, turnips, carrots, lettuce, pie melons, black-eyed and crowder peas, onions, sweet and hot peppers, kohlrabi – practically any kind of vegetable that could be found in any garden in season but always as much as possible of the production was ‘put up’ for winter use by canning, preserving, drying, etc.”

What I’ve experienced in my garden was true even back then: “Weeds seemed to thrive even better than the planted crops.”

Their irrigation system was simple: a dam across the Smith Branch of Johnson Creek, with a ditch that brought the water to the field without the use of a pump.

I do wish I could time-travel and see the Oehler’s garden. I bet I could learn a lot from the family about gardening.

Joe Herring Jr. is a Kerrville native who has planted a garden each spring for more than thirty years. A few have been pretty good.



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