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Lamb's Ear

Micaiah Saldaña, Editor (English 2024)

Last summer, my boyfriend (now fiancé) took me to Hershey Gardens to see the roses. I've loved roses ever since I lived in a brick farmhouse with a rose garden, and upon seeing the many varieties of my favorite flower spread before me, I smiled as if meeting with old friends. We wandered amongst the blooms, leaning down to smell their sweet perfume and reaching out to touch their satin petals. Eventually, we made our way past the roses to the kitchen garden. Here the air was spiced with the scent of thyme, rosemary, and mint. But something more special than spices caught my eye. Nestled against the earth like a child against its mother was a familiar plant. I reached down and stroked its downy leaves. *Lamb's ear*. I called my boyfriend over and invited him to feel its leaves too. He wanted to know how I knew such a small plant by name. *My grandpa* was the simple answer, and he understood right away.

Grandpa taught me almost everything I know about plants. He's the only reason I can identify lamb's ear, honeysuckle, carnations, and daffodils. I grew up following him around his sprawling backyard, "helping" by clumsily watering plants, pulling weeds,

and sitting through botany lessons that I didn't fully appreciate until much later. Grandpa taught me that I could pull up wild onions for my mud pies, that I could swing from grapevines if they were strong enough, and that lamb's ear was soft and fuzzy like the ears of a real lamb. I always marveled at his ability to identify any plant just by looking at it.

After we had finished with the plants, we would tend the birds. Grandpa readily named these too, pointing out sparrows, robins, blue jays, and mourning doves. We would fill his bird feeders and bird bath just so my grandmother could watch hummingbirds and cardinals from her seat at the dining room table. He would often join her there, looking up from a crossword puzzle or peanut-butter-covered apple to catch a glimpse of the chickadees and bluebirds that hopped amongst his flowers.

As a child, Grandpa looked after his family's chickens and vegetable garden, selling the vegetables at a farm stand and helping his mother prepare produce for canning. When he grew up, he found his calling in the grocery store industry rather than agriculture.

So although he dreamed of being a farmer, he happily settled for a flower garden. Grandpa coaxed peonies rather than crops from the ground and tended to cardinals instead of cows. I don't think he minded; after all, he was the best flower and bird farmer this side of the Mississippi.

If he wasn't working in the garden, Grandpa would tell stories. There were tales for every occasion: going on walks, flipping pancakes, reading C.S. Lewis, decorating the Christmas tree. And he always had stories about his flowers. Under his wreath of stark white hair was a treasure trove of myths and anecdotes about everything from peaches and daisies to thistles and Balsam firs. Take, for example, a flower that looked like it had a tiny drop of blood at its center (its name escapes me now). According to Grandpa, that drop of scarlet was said to have come from a queen who was sewing and accidentally stuck herself with the needle; the blood from her fingertip fell onto the white petals. *That's why you need a thimble when you sew*, he told me. I wish I remembered the name of the flower; I should have paid better attention to his stories.

Grandpa died less than a year ago, in the spring when his flowers had started blossoming. I think of him whenever I'm tending to my ever-growing army of plants. Orchids crowd the windowsills of my college apartment, their roots slowly trying to crawl out of the pots. A cactus suns itself on my dresser, and in the living room, the bright red petals of my amaryllis have begun to unfurl. I've assembled this floral horde in his honor, a blooming memorial to our times together in his backyard garden.

One day, in my own garden, I will walk amongst flowers and herbs, watering, weeding, and pruning as I go, with my children's small feet pattering after me. In the woods, we'll dig up wild onions to complement dandelion stews and pop wild strawberries into our mouths. We'll set a hummingbird feeder outside the kitchen window and watch cardinals splash in our bird bath. Of course, I won't forget to teach the little ones how to spot lamb's ear. *Look*, I will say as we kneel in the warm earth to pet the velvet leaves. *Feel how soft it is. Isn't it lovely?*

