

**On Being a Farm Wife**  
(and other hazards)  
**Joyce Bupp**



It's one of those earthy fragrances that instinctively identifies itself. Not quite as pungent as well-aged stable manure hauled on a damp morning. Not quite as subtle as the odor of earthworms after a warm rain. Not soothing like a whiff of pine or the clean scent of moss-covered forest floor.

Our son labels it "gross." The Farmer jokingly calls it "ground" meat.

I prefer to consider it the fine fragrance of promise, thank you.

Admittedly, the distinctive aroma of sterilizing soil wafting out of the kitchen comes up short of that of chocolate cake or roasting chicken or a cheese-smothered pizza ready to exit the oven.

Purchased potting soil would eliminate sterilizing my own. But the manure and organic-matter rich soil available outside the back door — literally — is plentiful and free. In pre-microwave years, I would bake it for an hour or so in the oven, during which time the distinctive aroma of baking soil permeated the whole house, while weed seeds and disease-causing microorganism hopefully met their end.

A microwave oven makes the procedure much quicker. Then, the plastic-enclosed container of steaming soil is plunked immediately on the back porch to cool.

Thus, the "gross" scent has little time to poke its way around the house.

This season's first batch of soil dutifully went from the microwave to the porch, where it was left sit overnight — and where the container promptly froze to the picnic table as the Arctic bombed us with a glacial air mass. One warm afternoon several days later finally thawed it out and set my fingers itching to plant something. Anything!

T'was but a few days until the first seedlings were poking through the ground, nudged by the gentle warmth utilized by placing the flat of damp potting soil on the hot-water heater in the basement. So much for fancy seed-starting equipment.

Since the greenhouse is kept at barely plant-maintenance temperatures during cold weather, the two-leafed babies were snuggled onto the west windowsill in the living room, to bask in warm, afternoon sunshine. The sun does still shine. And will more frequently soon. We promise.

Our first windowsill infants are of the Purple Coneflower genre, a perennial which is reputed to thrive in hot, dry places and bloom the summer long, once established. Purple coneflowers are similar to the bright yellow gloriosa daisies, except they are . . .

well, you know, purple. They're a plant I've wanted to try for several years and will be this year's annual, new-plant experiment.

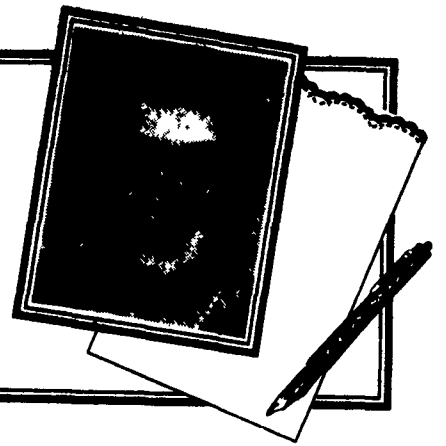
And on his stop at the Agway store recently, The Farmer picked up my requested pack of Heinz #1370 tomato seeds. This is a canning tomato, which I stumbled across by accident a few years ago. It's medium-sized, solid, meaty yields nearly all ripen at the same time, mid-to-late August. So, I can "put up" our winter tomato needs within a week or two and not be still buried under baskets of ripe tomatoes when more important things — like silage harvest and the York Fair — are under way.

A few plants of Early Girl and Big Girl (sounds like a feminist plot), plum-shaped Enchantment (the first and last tomato picked from our garden last year — seeds available by catalog from Pinetree Garden Seeds, Box 300, New Gloucester, Maine 04260) and a couple of stalks of Long Keeper should keep us, fresh-tomato-addicts seeing red from June through early December. All for a couple dollars worth of seeds. Where else can you get a bargain like that?

Time to "gross" up the kitchen again with another batch of steaming soil.

There's a packet of Buttercrunch Lettuce seeds downstairs calling my name.

**Ida's Notebook**  
by  
**Ida Risser**



Recently, I reread an aunt's 1904 diary to see what she did that winter on the farm. Mostly, I picked out differences between then and now. They baked their own bread and made 30 pounds of butter at a time. The upstairs was swept with a broom and after butchering hogs, they "fried up sausage." Now I'll admit that I too have "fried up meat" but then I canned it rather than covering it with lard in a crock.

One day the aunt and her mother "cut our aprons" and also cut up material for rag carpet. There were tradesmen who turned the rags into colorful floor coverings.

The men on the farm cut and hauled ice to the ice cellar. They stripped tobacco and then sold it for 7½¢ a pound.

Church was attended every Sunday and many funerals were noted in the diary. Time was also spent at a local lyceum or public lecture. There was a Literary Society in the community too. And, spelling bees brought neighbor-

hoods together.

A new cook stove was ordered and housecleaning was started by cleaning the garret. Later in the spring they moved the kitchen to the summerhouse in order to keep the house cool. The garden was dug and manure put on before planting potatoes.

During this time, many uncles and aunts visited together with cousins. They not only came for meals but stayed overnight. And, when someone was ill, the relatives came to sit with the patient. They traveled by horse and carriage on muddy roads as that was the accepted method of transportation.

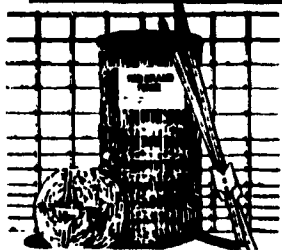
The lady who wrote this diary was 20 years old in 1904. Little did she know that she would live to be over 100 years old and see many changes not only in travel but in housekeeping methods too. Electricity brought many changes and made work easier, although, I would guess, they were as happy then as we are today.

*make it Milk* SM

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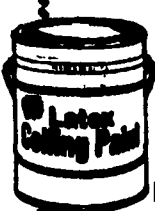
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