

Italians and Gardens

BY DICK DAVIS

As it was to her Italian ancestors, gardening is serious to Lucy Michael. So serious that twice when knee-replacement surgery was needed, Lucy delayed the procedures until winter so as not to miss valuable time with her plentiful plots of vegetables.

"Some people are always telling me I'm too old, that I should give up the garden," says Lucy, who will be 85 in May. "But, hell, I don't think I'm old. I'm not about to give up the garden and sit around and watch television."

Lucy only dabbled in the vegetable gardens tended by her grandparents, parents and her younger brother Pat. But after Pat's death in 1984, Lucy assumed full-time duties. Lucy says she "poked, poked,

poked around" the plants too much for a very particular Pat, who often booted and eventually barred her from the garden. The sibling's numerous, highly animated gardening "discussions" entertained other family members and neighbors more than hit movies.

Much has been written about the benefits of gardening. Hundreds of philosophers and writers throughout the world eloquently compare cultivating a garden to being in heaven.

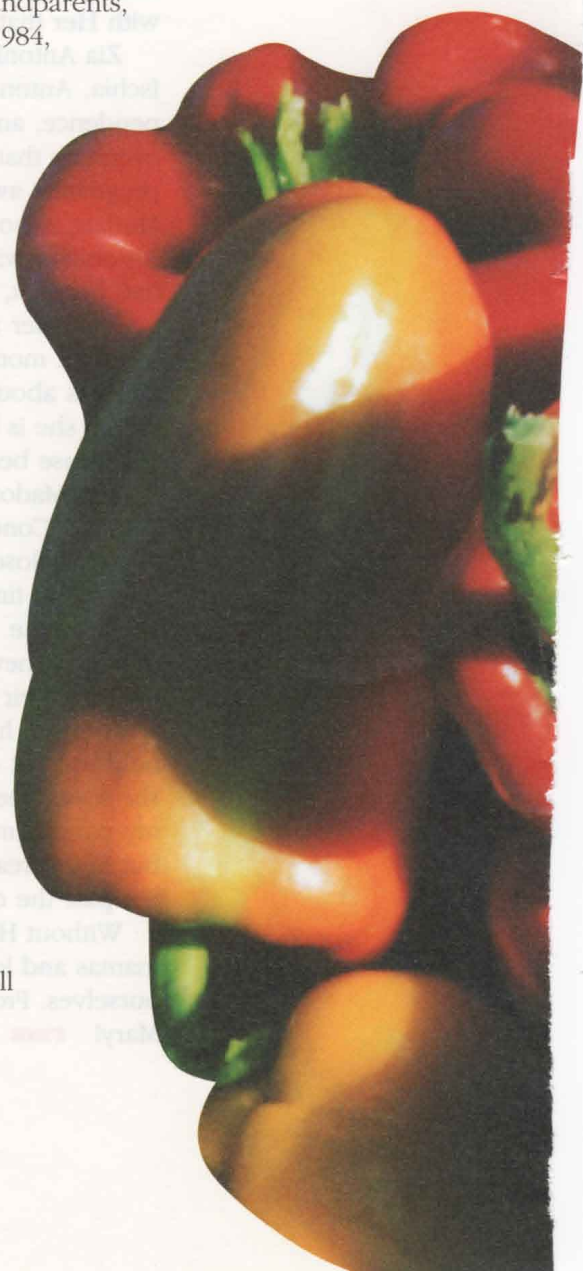
Lucy takes a more down-to-earth approach.

"I just like to be outside working and growing things," she says of her backyard patch, which during the summer growing season is about a lot and a half of blooming, verdant vegetables. "Plus, I couldn't see all that land going to waste."

Rows of about 500 peppers (capsicums), 300 tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, endive, broccoli, potatoes, basil, onions, celery, turnips, and of course garlic, the Italian aphrodisiac, mean very little wasted space. The hot Hungarian wax pepper is Lucy's favorite for eating fresh, as well as for canning.



Lucy shows off her homegrown garlic.



A nephew, Dominic Thomas, tills the soil in the early spring, but Lucy does the vast majority of everything else by herself. She plants vegetables in mid to late May after the last frost and picks them by early fall. About 290 cloves of garlic go into the ground before the first snow in October and are harvested in July, before the summer solstice.

Edward Sakony and Gregory Ranelli, two now-deceased fellow Italian neighbors, offered advice to help Lucy continue the family tradition. Their mantras were don't let weeds get out of hand and don't cut away too many "suckers" from tomato plants.

Lucy, who never married, admits to taking pleasure in cooking, canning, giving away the bulk of the annual harvest, and sharing her crop-growing expertise, much like Sakony and Ranelli did with her. Mary Michael, a niece who lives a few miles away, is one of several beneficiaries of Lucy's knowledge.

For the record, Mary is my wife of eight years. So, as part of the wedding package, Lucy is my aunt. After years of urging from Aunt Lucy, in 1999 Mary started a comparatively modest 400 square foot garden. My non-Italian roots weren't interested in growing anything other than an

occasional beard but I grudgingly agreed to help.

Little did I know how much I'd appreciate time in our garden, or enjoy munching tomatoes fresh from the vine, or get satisfaction from canning peppers, spaghetti sauce and salsa. *Mama mia!* My dad is probably spinning in his grave at the thought of me dirtying my hands among plants.

Mary, 42, has a double dose of Italian gardening genes. Her maternal grandmother, Teresa Cataldo, suffered through winters in Toledo, Ohio, only to be rejuvenated by warm weather and summers toiling in a garden. Had she not tried to single-handedly remove a tree stump from her vegetable plot, Teresa may have lived beyond her 89 years.



Lucy instructs Mary on the fine points of planting garlic.

Says Mary, "I've become more concerned about our environment and the use of so many chemicals and possibly toxic sprays. It's wonderful to be able to grow your own vegetables and know they're fresh. And when I'm in the garden, I feel very much at peace, like I'm connecting with a wonderful world."

Several varieties of peppers and tomatoes along with potatoes, sweet potatoes, zucchini, garlic, basil, thyme, celery, carrots, Bibb lettuce, eggplant, onions, shallots, parsley, rosemary and chives fill Mary's garden. The Fat 'n Sassy pepper — hefty, thick-walled gem great for roasting — is her favorite.

So far, her knees are fine. And if we're lucky, Mary will still be gardening in the tradition of her ancestors during the year 2040. **FINE**

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