

Garvin and Effie Porter

PICKENS COUNTY, S.C.

If you ask Effie Porter to name the love of her life, she might hesitate just a second. Of course, it's her husband, Garvin, who she's been married to for 65 years. But her garden comes in a close second.

Every year the Porters' garden in Pickens County, S.C., provides a bountiful harvest of vegetables and flowers. The vegetables, which used to be planted out of necessity, are now more of a habit and a hobby. Flowers are Effie's passion.

Her devotion to the flower garden is a characteristic learned from her mother. Like many children of the South raised in the Great Depression, Effie worked right beside her parents planting and hoeing what would eventually become the food on their table. But Effie's mother went a little beyond the norm. Each child planted a row of strawberries, about 10 plants, and cared for them. Then they picked the berries and sold them for spending money. In addition each child was allowed a row of flowers, a bright section of zinnias, petunias and marigolds.

"We saved the seeds from year to year as there was no money to go and buy seeds," Effie said. "This was our 'fun' in the summer."

Once married, she and Garvin also planted vegetables to make sure they had food to can for the winters. But she always planted flowers. Now their seven-acre homestead is an oasis of blooming things that serves as a sanctuary for both them and their children.

"My parents' land includes an old homestead on which nothing remains but a field of naturalized bulbs," said daughter Sue Heiney. "At the peak of their bloom, I'm compelled to think that heaven must be a field of blooming narcissus."

"Garvin has always had his hobbies, like hunting, and I have my sewing and embroidery," Effie said. "But the garden is something we can both do as a joint project and be proud of the results."

While Garvin is mostly the vegetable gardener and Effie's passion is flowers, their paths cross often and they each enjoy all aspects of the garden. Effie makes sure they plant "fun" things in the vegetable garden, such as plum granny melon (Queen Anne Pocket Melon), and Garvin's list of favorite flowers is almost as long as his wife's.



Photo by Amanda Heiney

Effie and Garvin Porter.

The Porters' harvest has a well-known reputation throughout Pickens County. Not only do they give away plenty of fruits and vegetables, including a bountiful harvest of blueberries, they also love sharing their flowers.

"At one time the altars of five different churches were decorated with flowers from our garden," Effie said.

Today these avid gardeners are slowing down a bit. Garvin now enjoys bird-watching instead of hunting, and plants rows of Mexican sunflowers to attract them.

"When the sunflowers are in bloom, we sit at the edge of the garden and watch the goldfinches and other birds feed," Effie said. "Then in the fall migration of monarchs we see dozens of them on the same flowers getting nectar. Sometimes there's a cloud of butterflies in the air."

Whether the garden has been part of the recipe for success for an admirably long marriage or just the contributing factor for many great recipes, it's a part of the Porters' life that will always be there. A couple of years ago Garvin and Effie, 87 and 86 respectively, decided they should quit gardening because they were too old.

"As you can see it didn't stick, last year we had our best garden ever," Effie says. 

— Karen M. Alley

Who's Your Favorite Gardener?

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