

Gardening Through Tragedy

3rd grade State Winner

Illustrated by Florin High School

I have had three gardens in my life. I think gardening with your family helps to create a bond with your family and is a lot of fun. When we find creatures while gardening, from worms to frogs, we always name them silly names like Brownie or Night Crawler. My life would be harder and more miserable without gardens because I love gardening.

We planted our first garden in Paradise, California when I was three. It was fun planting our garden seeds as a family. My sisters and I really liked digging holes and helping Dad start our garden. I remember that our strawberries grew tremendously. I really liked the strawberries because they were ripe and juicy. We could eat them as soon as we found them—finder's keepers! When we planted the blueberry plant, it was hard to get through the ground because it was so dry. We learned that the ground isn't acidic enough in Paradise for blueberries to grow well there. We grew tomatoes, and they grew into a tunnel which was awesome. It was cool to walk under them.

Only three years after that, a fire came to Paradise. Because everything was so dry, it burned our home and our garden. My friend Gavin's house burned down, too. The Camp Fire ended up destroying 153,336 acres, and that was a lot of gardens. It was actually the most destructive fire in California history. Because of the fire, we needed to find somewhere else to "plant our roots."

My parents decided to move to Orland, California. Even before we moved into our new house, we drove over to where it was being built and dug three holes for three apple trees and planted them. The varieties were Gala, Liberty, and Pink Lady. We got those apple trees because Dad did research and found out those would grow well in Orland's climate. We used a small board to help them grow straight. We also planted yellow daffodil bulbs nearby. We tended the garden nearly every day except Sunday.

Since then, we have planted two more apple trees and nineteen other trees—maples, hackberries, oranges, lemons, avocados, peaches, and cherries. Each tree needed a big hole, so my sisters and I helped dig a lot of holes.

Our trees were still growing, so they didn't produce much fruit. They were still pretty little. It was amazing how sometimes we could grow an apple and hunt for it on the tree. It was fun to cut the apple, once we found it, into six slices so each member of my family could have at least one slice.

Right after we moved into our new home, the pandemic came and canceled school starting on my birthday! We suddenly had a bunch of time to add to our garden at our new home. We planted corn, green beans, watermelon, tomatoes, and my favorite, strawberries! That first garden was kind of rushed since we started late in the season, and it was a bit small.

Last year, we really wanted more strawberries, so we tore out the old garden and planted a much bigger one. We built a gate to keep out rabbits and moles, and we added water pipes to make watering easier. We planted cantaloupes and tried several other varieties of tomatoes.

My big sister really loves tomatoes, so we planted a lot of those. I also learned that corn grows better in Orland than in Paradise because we had a lot of tall trees in Paradise that blocked the sun. The sun provided food for the plants through a process called photosynthesis.

Planting a garden created a bond with nature and my family. It was so much fun and so much work. Gardening has taught me that the strawberries I grow taste the best. Digging holes earns muscle and apples. Finally, I learned that after a fire, you can always plant another garden. That's what helped me feel like my new home was more like the home I lost.

Diary of a Nectarine Tree

4th Grade State Winner

Illustrated by Woodland Senior High School

APRIL 20:

Hello! You may not know me. I'm a nectarine tree by the name of Ned. I'm new on the farm. For some reason, I have weird bud-things on my branches.

APRIL 30:

Hey! It turns out that those buds were flowers! I'm in bloom! I like this. When the petals fall off, it tickles.

MAY 6:

Oh no! Where the flowers used to be, now I have little green balls! What is happening to me?!?!?

MAY 12:

False alarm. This is actually a good thing! I have fruit! The nectarines are as smooth as glass.

MAY 26:

I heard from a squirrel, which is terrible for orchards but good for information, that the farmers are almost ready to harvest! Yippie!

My branches are getting heavy!

JUNE 8:

Lots of activity here. People are coming by and picking our nectarines. I feel like we're on a boat in an earthquake. Here's a person now! UHGCG!!! I feel SUPER seasick! I think I'll have to stop writing this entry in my journa-.

JUNE 27:

PICKING is still going strong! I'm wondering when they'll be done! At least I'm over getting sick when I'm being picked.

JULY 20:

It's super-hot! I wish I could have some lemonade! But hey, I have a new neighbor: Pomello the pomegranate tree! She's nice. Always up to discuss news from the squirrels.

AUGUST 2:

Season for picking is over and it is quiet as a mouse hole here. Pomello said, "Ahh. It's like my old garden. I was raised in a backyard pot, you know." Then she added, "It was a nice, quiet life, but I admit it was a tad boring."

P.S. I am almost done producing!

AUGUST 27:

Pomello is getting restless. I don't know what's going on! All she told me last night was winter is coming and the bounty of which she shall bring forth is coming around the bend. I didn't understand. What bounty? What bend? What was winter? All I could reply was, "This winter thing sounds bad. Is it?"

Pomello answered, "Maybe for you."

SEPTEMBER 10:

BRRRR!!!!!! It is getting as cold as the Himalayas! I wish I had fur like the squirrels and gophers.

SEPTEMBER 25:

Something is going on with Pomello. I think she is getting fruit! She has little balls on her branches like I did. I wonder what a pomegranate looks like.

OCTOBER 9:

I was right! Now she has red fruit shaped like a top. The workers are harvesting right now! I think now that I have lost my leaves, I will settle down for a nice long nap.

MARCH 10:

Good morning! I just woke up! Something is amiss here. There is a big cloud hovering over the farm! But it can't be a rain cloud. Oh my! It's a cloud of locusts! Locusts live in swarms that feed on crops, trees, and other plants. They are sort of like flying crickets but are more devastating. They can eat 160,000 tons of food each day. This amount of food would feed 800,000 people for a whole year. They can lead to famine if they eat too much. The farm is in trouble!

MARCH 21:

Oh no! The locusts have left, but the farm is in distress. I feel like a turkey with no feathers. I wish I had my leaves back.

APRIL 3:

Good news! The farm is back to normal. There is a rumor that an apricot tree is coming. I can't wait for my new friend.

The Ketchup Dream

5th Grade State Winner

Illustrated by Inderkum High School

I've been told the same story about my family's history since the day I was born. I listen to the story, but my family doesn't listen to me. Grandpa always says the same things. He tells me all about where my relatives came from, where they've been, and how we got where we are now. I don't care about those places. The place I want to be is on a big, juicy hamburger.

This is how Grandpa tells his story.

"Listen up, Melody. You need to be proud of your tomato heritage. You know, the first tomatoes can be traced to the South American Andes Mountains where they grew wild as cherry-sized berries."

"I know, Grandpa. You've told me before," I say, rolling my eyes.

"Just keep listening, Melody. This is important. We know that padres following the Spanish conquistadors most likely sent the first tomato seeds to Spain in the early 1500s. We gained little attention in Spain, but soon traveled to Italy—a country that embraced our tomato ancestors and developed numerous recipes which are still popular today."

Melody interrupts, "Now that's interesting. I like the part about food. Do you know anything else about our family history as food?" I ask with a great smile.

"I know that by the mid-sixteenth century, tomatoes made their return to America via English colonists but did not become an important part of the American diet until after World War I."

"I want to be part of someone's diet *today*, Grandpa. I want to be the ketchup inside someone's hamburger. Can you help me with that?"

"I want to do what makes you happy, my dear, so I will try to help," Grandpa says.

"I can't believe it, Grandpa. Will you actually help?"

"Of course! I will do anything for you," Grandpa says.

I feel as if I am on cloud nine. My grandpa is actually listening to the words that are coming out of my mouth.

"Okay, my dear. I have a plan. We need to get you harvested, onto a truck, and delivered to a processing plant," Grandpa says.

"Okay, I'm ready," I say, cheerfully.

"I am ready too. I will do this with you, Melody," Grandpa says.

"Just imagine Grandpa, how amazing it will be if we get in the same bottle. We could be on the same hamburger together!"

Grandpa replies, "There is no better time. Tomorrow is harvest day."

Melody asks, "What happens on harvest day, Grandpa?"

“Mechanical harvesters will move through the fields picking our entire tomato plant family and shaking us off the vine. Specially designed electronic sensors on the harvesters will sort the ripe, red tomatoes, *that’s us*, from the vine and transfer them into a gondola pulled by a tractor following alongside. We will immediately be transported from the fields by trucks. The trucks will haul us to a nearby state-controlled grading station to be graded, then on to a tomato processing plant where we will be sorted, washed, and chopped,” Grandpa explains.

“Wow, that’s so cool. I can’t wait!”

The next day everything happens just as Grandpa told me. Even though I have been cut into pieces, I’m excited because my dream is coming true. The entire process of ketchup manufacturing generally takes two to three hours, so Grandpa and I are going to be on a hamburger sooner than I thought!

Soon the next steps in the ketchup process begin. We are precooked in stainless steel vats. This preserves us and destroys bacteria. Next, we are pumped into pulping machines, which separate seeds, skins, and stems from the pulp. The pulp and juice are filtered through screens and processed further into ketchup.

The pulp is pumped into cooking tanks and heated to boiling. Precise amounts of sweeteners, vinegar, salt, spices, and flavorings are added to the tomato pulp. We are cooked for 30-45 minutes and circulated by rotating blades installed in the cookers. Once the cooking is complete, the ketchup mixture passes through a finishing machine, removing excess fiber and particles through screens, creating a smoother consistency.

After a few final steps, we are filled into ketchup bottles that have labels that remind people that ketchup is a good source of vitamins C and B. That’s because of us tomatoes.

That’s it. It happened. Grandpa and I are in the same ketchup bottle.

A week later we are at a little girl’s birthday party getting poured onto a big, juicy, hamburger. All my dreams have come true.

Saved

6th Grade State Winner

Illustrated by Florin High School

Some people believe I am a heroine, but maybe I am just an ordinary mother, California farmers depend on members of my family all the time to protect their crops. I am a teeny tiny wasp, *Tamarixia radiata*. This is a glimpse into my life as a humble parasitic wasp.

When I buzzed around the citrus tree on the school playground, I swear the kids swatted me away, even though I'm minuscule and they could never actually see me. Was this all the thanks I got for saving the oranges that they eat for lunch? Also, why can't they play somewhere else? There is a perfectly empty soccer field over there. Why do they have to do it in my nesting zone? I'm stingless, so I can't even protect myself! I zipped away as I dodged the swatting. I hummed around a house near the school as the owner of the house was talking to a pest control official. I knew the problem. A huge orange tree was starting to wither, and I noticed it was sick with the most devastating citrus killer in the world, Huanglongbing. Huanglongbing was a sign of my favorite nesting place, inside an Asian citrus psyllid. These plant-feeding insects spread the pathogenic bacterium that causes Huanglongbing disease. I darted over and skimmed around the leaves. Finally, I spotted the psyllids and got right to work. After laying a couple of eggs, one under each psyllid nymph, I decided to visit some other orange trees in the garden, knowing that my actions had prevented the psyllids from spreading Huanglongbing to the other trees in the garden and neighboring yards. The psyllids' bodies will become nutrients for my larvae. Once my newborns emerge, the psyllids won't be able to infect another citrus again.

While stopping to rest, I spied a mantis chowing down on a mosquito a few feet away. I also stared at some bees happily pollinating. A swallowtail fluttered gracefully through the garden, examining the orange tree I just saved. My mind was starting to relax when I realized that I was being pursued by an army of ants. I jerked out of the way as the ants attacked and escaped just in the nick of time. I zig-zagged around the mantis and zoomed over the garden fence. I hovered near another orange tree and dove out of the way of an interfering crow that swooped near me. The autumn leaves rustled by as I stationed myself on an evergreen near the tan house. I watched hummingbirds, butterflies, and carpenter bees travel from flower to flower as they produced a deep hum. As dusk started approaching, I flitted over to a crack under the rusty eaves of the ancient house. There, I held onto the rough wall as I shut my eyes and tried to drift off. One citrus psyllid jumped over the fence. Two psyllids jumped over the fence. Three psyllids jumped over the fence. Four psyllids jumped over the fence. Parasitic wasps like me just don't sleep.

Overnight, I thought of a plan to save more of California's prized citrus fruits. As soon as dawn broke, I flew as high as my little wings could take me. I finally spotted a truck with the words "Oranges, Grapefruits, Lemons, Pomelos" plastered on the tailgate. That was it! I shot over, assuming it was heading to a citrus orchard, and landed inside the bed of the pickup where I shuffled around until I saw rows of trees in the distance. The small oranges twinkled like diamonds in the sun's rays. As the truck rumbled close enough for me to fly over, I alighted, so I flew into the air and made out the slightest bit of yellow on a tree far away. I buzzed over to it and landed on the very tree I was looking at. Yes, this tree was infested with the psyllid, so I got to work right away! Another parasitic wasp flew over and started searching the other side of the tree. We worked together all afternoon. When our eggs were finally deposited under all the psyllid nymphs, I gave my teammate a high antenna since we had no

hands. I waved goodbye as I found a hole in a tree adjacent to the one that we saved. As I climbed in, I thought about how I could save the world tomorrow.

Charlie's Cilantro Crop

7th Grade State Winner

Illustrated by Sheldon High School

It was springtime along the Central Coast of California and twelve-year-old Charlie was very excited! His father Matt, who farmed many fruits and vegetables, had just told him that he could be in charge of the cilantro crop this year. Charlie had grown up helping his father on the farm, so he felt like he had what it took to manage the cilantro.

Charlie was glad that his dad had chosen cilantro for him since it was one of his favorite toppings on his most liked food...tacos! He had even recently been studying cilantro in school. He learned that it has many health benefits such as supporting your muscles, strengthening your bones, boosting your immunity, and helping your digestive system.

One of the things that Charlie already knew was that cilantro grew and was harvested best in the spring and late fall. He also knew that after sowing the seeds, cilantro was harvested in about three to four weeks.

The spring crops had already been harvested, so Charlie would soon be planting the fall crop. California had been through many dry seasons so getting sufficient water for the plants was always a concern. By the time midsummer heat had arrived, their well went dry. Charlie and his father were forced to have a deeper well dug so they could get the water they needed for their crops to survive. Once the well was dug, they planted their fall crops and gave them plenty of water.

Later that summer as Charlie ate his breakfast, he could hear the local news anchor conversing about the wildfires that were tearing through the state. Although he knew they were out of harm's way he felt bad thinking about the people that lived in those areas.

As Charlie harvested his cilantro later that day, he couldn't believe how big his crop was after getting the water it needed. He wondered how he would be able to sell it all. That night as he was boxing up his cilantro, a food truck rumbled in the drive. It was the Towering Taco Food Truck that was owned by Jose, who just happened to be the dad of Charlie's friend Rico. Jose had come by to pick up his weekly order of fresh onions, tomatoes, peppers, and cilantro. As Charlie loaded up his order, Jose talked to Matt about many things including the wildfires. Jose told Matt how he planned to take his food truck up to the fires the next day to feed the firefighters and the people that had lost their homes. Charlie quickly spoke up and told Jose that he would be glad to donate any of the cilantro that he needed. Jose gladly took Charlie up on his offer and invited Charlie to come along with them to help serve the tacos.

Early the next morning, Charlie hopped into the food truck and they eagerly drove off to help the victims of the fire. As they drew closer to their destination, they could see the hazy sky and smell smoke in the air. All around them was the devastating sight of burnt trees, homes, and buildings.

When they reached the community center that was still standing, fire trucks, weary firemen, and people with discouraged faces lit up when they saw a food truck pulling in. Once they parked, Charlie and Rico got out and opened the side doors. They went back and turned on the gas as Jose got all the supplies ready, pulled down his giant skillet, and started quickly cooking.

When the food was ready, Jose organized an assembly line where he scooped the meat onto the taco, Rico dumped on the salsa and onions, and Charlie topped it with his fresh cilantro and handed it out the window to the people. In just a few minutes the line stretched further than Charlie could see and almost everyone has a smile on their face.

By the time they finished serving everyone, they were almost out of food, and the sun was starting to go down. Before they left, they were thanked many times by the victims of the fire and were praised by the firefighters. They left with an empty truck and full hearts for the good deed they had done. When Charlie left for home, the thought of how his little cilantro patch had helped make a difference for so many hungry people that day, and he went to sleep with a smile on his face.

Caesar's Salad

8th Grade State Winner

Illustrated by Inderkum High School

It is a crisp, chilly day. Then again, it's always crisp and chilly when you live in a refrigerator. This particular fridge is in the kitchen of a California home. This fridge houses four shelves. These shelves are more than slabs of glass on which to store food. Each is home to a different type of produce.

The bottom shelf hosts the rather introverted lettuce leaves. I guess it makes sense that they're shy and all, considering they're just tiny leaves before they start blooming and flowering. Above them are the confident, some would say cocky, carrots from Kern County, where most of the nation's fresh carrots are grown. Ever since they found out that British aviators ate special carrots during World War II to overcome night blindness, they think they are better than everyone else.

Next shelf up is us tomatoes, the fun-loving residents of the fridge. By the way, my name's Roman, a Roma tomato. I'm from right here in California, our nation's top producer of processing tomatoes. Residing above us all, on the top shelf are the onions. Nobody really knows much about them. They've always been too high and mighty to grace us with their presence, but it's gotten even worse since their U.S. consumption rate went up by 50% over the past twenty years. If you ask me, I think they just stink up the joint, I mean, what other vegetable has sulfuric compounds that make others cry? That's just messed up.

Those who live on each shelf acknowledge the existence of one another but never interact with anyone from a different shelf. Our personalities are too different. All of us are happy keeping to ourselves.

Then everything changed.

The owner of the house, Caesar, opens the refrigerator and pulls one of us from each shelf. Before I know what's going on, I am plunged into a wooden salad bowl so large that it's supported by four legs and sits in a corner. With me are a carrot, head of lettuce, and an onion.

We all stare uncomfortably at one another. Seemingly, nobody wants to speak, so I do.

"You're all looking very fresh today," I say, spitting out the first awkward thought that enters my mind.

"You, as well," replies a stern-looking carrot. They are all so serious. It's probably because they know that baby carrots are just regular carrots who happen to be skinny and start to mouth off and then get themselves peeled and then chopped into bits and pieces. The thought would scare me, too.

Farthest away stands the head of lettuce, who looks totally freaked out.

"Hi!" I say to him with a cheerful ring. "Would you like to come join the rest of us?"

"Okay," he replies unsurely.

"Aren't the rest of you freaking out?" asks the onion in quite an accusatory tone. "We're stuck in a bowl with no chance of escape. A big bowl, I might add. One with nobody I can force into crying."

“Well, you’re lucky I’m here,” I joke. “This would be an even more boring food-napping if I weren’t here.”

The carrot chuckles. This takes me by surprise; I never thought I’d see a carrot capable of showing emotion. After the early American colonists raised them between rows of tobacco to repel beetles, I thought carrots were all war-torn and traumatized.

“I guess you’re right,” the carrot agrees. “Better you than someone else.”

As we talk, we get along better than I thought was possible for residents of different shelves.

“You know what? You guys aren’t as bad as we tomatoes take you for,” I say.

The others smile and agree.

“I feel the same way,” says the onion.

We realize that although we enjoy living separately with our own kinds, we enjoy being together even more. My quirky, fun-loving personality brings the lettuce out of his shell and makes the carrot embrace the fun side of life.

We complement each other.

I feel a warm feeling deep inside and when I look down, we’re all divided into miniature pieces of ourselves and intertwined with each other. We’re a salad. Caesar enjoys us as a salad more than he ever enjoyed us individually. I guess this is how California became the “salad bowl” of America. As the legend of Caesar’s salad spreads throughout the fridge, everything changes for the better. We are no longer divided. It’s like they say: United we’re eaten, divided we’re beaten.

Editor’s Note: Did you know that tomatoes store best at room temperature, and the true main ingredients of a traditional Caesar’s salad are romaine, anchovies, croutons, and parmesan cheese? But we certainly like the sound of this Caesar salad!

Gabee's Magic

Honorable Mention

Illustrated by Sheldon High School

"Ahhhhhhh! It's a bee!" Zinnia said, running away.

"What's so scary about bees?" her friend Anna asked.

"They sting you!" Zinnia insisted.

"They only sting you if they think you are trying to hurt them or their hive!" Anna replied.

"What's a hive?" Zinnia asked?"

"A beehive is what a colony of bees calls home."

"Oh so what's a colony?"

"A colony is a family unit consisting of a Queen, workers – and for part of the year – drones."

"Oh, I get it!" Zinnia said, "A hive is where a colony lives."

"Correct, give the girl a prize!"

"Ha-ha, very funny Anna, but I still do not like bees!"

"But why? They're so nice and sweet."

Ring! Ring! They heard the school bell ring,

"YES, we get to go home," Zinnia said, relieved.

"See you tomorrow, Anna said.

On the way home, "*Follow me, follow me!*" a little voice said. Zinnia looked around but did not see anything.

"I must be imagining things," she said to herself. Then, she heard it again!

"Follow me, follow me!"

When she looked ahead, she thought, "That's strange the road is blocked. Guess I have to take the long way home. Hmmm, that road is blocked too. Then she heard it again,

"Follow me, follow me!"

She followed the advice until she came to a field of zinnias. "What a coincidence," she said.

When she turned to walk away, there was a blinding light; when she could see again, she found herself standing in the middle of a field.

“What’s going on here? What’s that buzzing? Ah! It’s a giant bee! Please don’t sting me!” Zinnia was ready to run, but she couldn’t move. When she looked down, her feet were no longer there. She had become a Zinnia! “WHAT’S HAPPENING?” Zinnia yelled. “HELP!”

“Can I ‘bee’ of assistance?” a little voice said from behind. Zinnia turned and saw the giant bee.

“AUGH! WHO ARE YOU!?” she asked, freaking out.

“I am Gabee, your BEEautiful fairy godmother. I’m going to help you learn more about bees. First, I want to show you how bees pollinate. We pollinate by going into a flower to get the nectar and pollen, and when we go into the flower, we collect pollen with our furry legs, then we go to a different flower and drop off some of our pollen and collect more, and we just keep doing that,” Gabee said.

“Oh, then you carry the pollen to a different flower. So, bees do have a purpose other than stinging people?” Zinnia asked.

“Yes, we only sting people if we think that they are going to hurt us. We don’t like to sting people because once we do, we die,” Gabee said.

“I will try not to scare a bee and make it feel like it has to sting me to protect itself,” Zinnia replied. “What do bees do with the nectar and the pollen?”

“We take it to our hive. Would you like to see the hive?” Gabee asked.

“Really? But how?” Zinnia asked.

“Well, like I said, I am your BEEautiful fairy godmother,” Gabee said as she flew over Zinnia and sprinkled magic pollen on her, and Zinnia transformed into a bee herself.

“Wow, I’m a bee!” Zinnia said, amazed.

“Did you know that the worker bees are all girls?” Gabee asked as she showed Zinnia around the hive.

“Wow, that’s girl power!” Zinnia said, and Gabee laughed.

“And you might say this is gross, but bees have a honey stomach, so you could say we spit up the honey. The honey we make is mostly nectar. Did you know that the queen is the only one that lays eggs?”

“That’s awesome,” Zinnia replied.

“So, are you still scared of bees?” Gabee asked.

Zinnia smiled, “I still don’t want them to sting me, but I want to start helping them. I have learned a lot about bees, and now I know that bees are not bad. I actually kind of like them now.”

“Are you ready to go home now?” Gabee asked.

“Hmm,” Zinnia said. “I like it here, but yes, I’m ready to go home now.”

She suddenly saw a blinding light and found herself back on the road home.

“That’s strange the roads are not blocked anymore. I must have *Bee-n* imagining things.”

At school the next day, “Awwwwwwwww! It’s a bee,” Zinnia said, as a bee gently landed on her.

“I thought you didn’t like bees?” Anna asked.

“Well, may-bee I’ve had a change of heart.”