

Magic Strawberry Grace

By Lockie Hunter, Asheville, North Carolina

When I was growing up, in Appalachia, in the '70s, family garden plots surrounded me. My neighbor, Mac, gardened for the thrill of having the Tennessee earth under his fingernails. Mac was ardent about his strawberries. I loved his patch, too.

On July 4, many years ago, our neighborhood held a big fireworks display. While everyone was watching the explosions, I sneaked off to Mac's strawberry patch. I twisted each berry until I found the ripe ones and ate them right off the vine. With juice seeping down my chin, I felt a hand on my shoulder. Although I couldn't see the face, I noticed the dirt under the fingernails. Mac. "What ya doin' there, eating all my berries?" he asked. He led me back to the crowd, the evidence of my crime stained crimson on my tank top. When we reached my mother, Mac said, "I think it's time we gave the little one a patch of her own."

I met Mac at his patch the next day, and he hand-picked a portion of his prized berries. "It's so small," I said, tenderly cradling the plant like a doll.

"It'll grow," said Mac.

My mom deeded a small spot in the garden to my baby strawberry. The first season, it sent out slender strings. "Look, Mac," I said. "My baby plant is stretching."

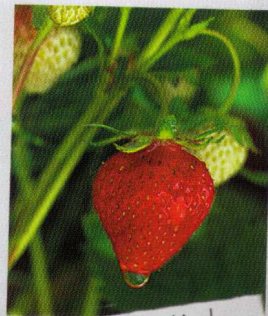
"Those are runners. It's doing its job. Those runners will root and produce new plants." The next season was one of tremendous fruit. My baby had matured. In the following years, my patch produced so much fruit that even after making strawberry smash, strawberry butter and strawberry fool (a dessert we made using fresh berries and whipped cream), there were buckets of frozen berries in the freezer. My patch even surpassed Mac's in aggregate fruit produced. "You've got the magic strawberry grace," Mac said.

When my family moved to Boston, I took a cutting of my plant. I cradled it in my lap for 12 hours until we stopped at a hotel. I demanded that we bring the plant into the hotel so it wouldn't be "lonely" in the car.

It wasn't until we were on the New Jersey Turnpike the next day that I discovered the plant was missing—I had left it at the hotel. I wept from New Jersey to Massachusetts. During my entire time in Boston, I refused to plant strawberries.

In my thirties, I moved back south, to Georgia. I had never acclimated to the chill of the North, the shorter growing season and the sounds of the birds. I wanted to feel at home again, yet the only thing prospering in my backyard were burly pokeberry stalks. Obviously, the previous owners were not gardeners.

Shame rose in me as the pokeberries threatened to take over the yard. So one hazy day, I cleaved a way through the pokeberries to a bare site on the far fence. This took the better part of the morning and left me with a zigzag of red lines on my arms from the branches. I stepped into a thicket of vines at the fence, sweat stinging my eyes when I saw it—a faithful white flower. The strawberries had found me. Standing barefoot in this new soil, I was home. *



Thanks, Mac!



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