

This week's Lancer Letter was first written last year at the beginning of the summer and is this week's summer rerun.

I grew up in a house where my family lived on the first floor and my grandparents on the second floor. My grandfather was self-employed as a huckster – he sold fruits and vegetables from door to door. He began his business with a horse and wagon and then later used a truck.

When I was around 8 years old, I became curious about my grandfather's business and the fruits and vegetables he sold. When I learned that the seeds from a watermelon could be planted in the ground to grow more watermelons, I had to try it. I took a seed from watermelon I had eaten and put it in a patch of hard ground at the base of the stairs to my grandparent's apartment. A week or so after planting, my grandfather placed a fully grown watermelon on that spot. Initially, I was excited when I saw the watermelon but in a few seconds, reason took over and I realized as my parents and grandfather were chuckling that I had been duped. So went my first lesson in gardening. After 34 years of growing vegetables and flowers, you won't catch me with that trick now.

I enjoy my time in the dirt. Dirt isn't judgmental, it stays where you put it and it doesn't complain. I have found that gardening provides many metaphors that relate to education and raising children. In the spirit of these summer months, this week, I'd like to share some of those metaphors.

Metaphor #1: Things don't always grow where or how you planned it in your head.

Early in my years at my present home, I decided to build a trellis along the side of my vegetable garden plot to screen it from the road. I thought that it shouldn't just serve an aesthetic purpose but also a pragmatic purpose. I decided I would plant my peas on the garden side of the trellis and plant vining, flowering plants on the side facing the road. Even though it was crystal clear in my head what the peas would look like covering the trellis on the inside and the flowering vines on the outside, would you believe those plants grew where they wanted? Peas grew on the outside, flowers grew on the inside and they mixed together, destroying the vision in my mind.

My incorrect expectations for the peas and vines reminded me of how sometimes, children do not do what we envision. Even when we provide the proper supports (the trellis), they sometimes just don't grow the way we want them to grow and they don't go the places we want them to go. This is also true of programs and initiatives that we may undertake in the district – sometimes they just don't go as planned.

Metaphor #2: You reap what you sow.

When you plant a cucumber seed, you get a cucumber plant. When you plant a carrot seed, you get a carrot. What we put into our children's minds come out in their lives. If we plant seeds of hate, they learn to hate. If we plant seeds of love and concern, they are compassionate. We always have to be careful of what seeds we plant in our children.

Metaphor #3: Weeds prohibit proper growth.

I define a weed as a plant growing where you don't want it. If you want your vegetables and flowers to flourish, weeds cannot constrain the plant or shade the plant from the sun. The plant you want to grow and bear fruit must be able to grow deep roots, uninhibited by roots from competing plants. This is also true of children. If we want them to be productive, we have to help them keep their lives free of distractions, persons and activities that will prevent them from being rooted in a solid foundation. Things like excessive time spent playing video games and sitting on the couch, can overshadow proper child development.

Metaphor #4: Pruning produces growth.

Certain plants need to be pruned. In the spring, when you cut them back, you feel like you are destroying them – like they will never grow back. The irony is that the more you prune them, the more the plant will fill in with new growth. This is a metaphor for helping children grow. Sometimes they need some "pruning"(discipline) which may feel uncomfortable and like it is hurting them more than it really is. In the end, they grow from the negative experience.

Gardening presents many metaphors for the growth and development of children. After all, it is said:
“Life began in a garden.”