



### *Regarding the Snow Peas*

There is something deeply healing about getting your hands in the dirt and truly connecting with the authentic, living world that we inhabit. It can keep you grounded. It is a reminder that the world goes on. A trip to the garden ignites a nurturing spirit and a sense of pride that is a balm for the soul.

Being a fairly new gardener myself, I can't offer the knowledge or wisdom that comes with decades of growing; but I can share a simple truth I've learned so far. The key to gardening isn't having a green thumb. In fact, I'm not convinced that such a thing even exists. Rather, the key is simply paying attention and being curious about what you find. Plants talk; you just have to listen. Wilting leaves signal the need for water, whereas yellowing leaves can identify soil that lacks nutrients. Holes in leaves and mysterious larvae demand investigation.

I spent a lot of time in the dirt this summer. As part of my summer research exploring nutrition security in my local community, I had the opportunity to work in a food pantry garden which donates 100% of its produce to local pantries. I also engaged with community partners in the emergency food network and assisted with patient care in clinic. While at the garden, I reflected on my first year of medical school and took stock of the important things in my life. I considered different balancing acts that I could pursue this fall that might help me keep up with my interests and commitments as my medical training intensifies. But really, most of my time under the sun – seeding the snow peas, weeding the onions, and harvesting strawberries – was realizing just how large the intersection between gardening and medicine is.

With my first year of medical school in my rearview mirror, the options for specialties are very broad. I intend to keep an open mind to opportunities that present themselves, however, I feel I have found a home with Family Medicine. The beauty (and challenges!) of longitudinal care and watching patients as they grow and change over time is not dissimilar from the evolution from cotyledon leaves to mature foliage. Different stages of life will bring up new joys and hardships that should be handled with compassion and care, by the physician and the gardener.

There are some things you can control as a gardener, but most of the magic in the garden is beyond your control. The best you can do is give the plant every possible advantage by preparing the soil, trying different solutions to keep pests at bay, and removing weeds that may be stealing water, nutrients, and sun. And then, all you can do is watch the plants grow – with a curious eye – and deal with new challenges as they arise.

Substitute physician for gardener and patient for plant in the paragraph above, and the intersection between gardening and medicine will become clear. Change soil to the social determinants of health, pests to disease, and weeds to barriers blocking a patient's path to health and wellness.

Different plants have different needs, much like different patients do. One patient might be able to lower their blood pressure with lifestyle changes alone, while another may require three to four medications. It's also easier to deal with one aphid feasting on your basil plant compared to a hungry swarm. From my experience so far, an important part of medicine is focusing on prevention rather than treatment, empowering your patient with knowledge and resources, and then letting your patient take the lead.

I think the most important commonality is patience – both as a gardener and a physician. I remember planting an entire plot of snow pea seeds at the end of May. I was excited about the future seedlings that would emerge two weeks later. But I was also nervous – what if the soil dries up before germination? What if I planted the seeds too deeply that the sunlight would be too far out of reach? Part of me wanted to just zip through those next few weeks and see if the seedlings would sprout. But I realized that nature takes time, life takes time. There is no fast forward button. Lifestyle changes, chronic disease management, among other challenges, take time and require thorough follow-up. Throughout June, I helped to weed and water the seedlings, giving them the best possible chance to grow into hardy mature plants. Now, almost two months later, the first snow peas are beginning to emerge on beautiful, green vining plants. While the outcomes are not always as bright and sunny in clinic, celebrating the wins (big and small) with patients is the culmination of patience and incremental progress.

While we frequently discussed the health benefits of eating well in lecture, my work this summer has inspired me to jump aboard the Food is Medicine train in a more intentional way. I believe food access, specifically produce planted and tended in local soil, is an area I can focus on that has a direct impact on patient and community health. As I move forward in my training, I hope to prioritize trips to the garden to visit my snow peas, to nourish my soul, and to remind myself that life moves on outside the walls of the lecture hall, the library, the hospital. Gardening has become a place where a hobby, medicine, and community engagement intersect, and I hope that being able to return to the garden will sustain me when the flashcards pile up, the charting seems endless, and the roadblocks drown out the wins. With the renewal the garden provides, whether in the twisting tendrils of the snow peas or the fragrant waft from the basil, my soul can truly be recharged.