

Steven Wingate

Dirt Farmer Lucas

I can't see the Rocky Mountains, or even their foothills, from my north-central Colorado house. I might, though, if that house were not so closely surrounded by dozens of others differing from it only in color and small details of layout. If I could see those mountains, they would be distant purple-green reminders that my environment needs protection, and that I—as a willing denizen of the suburbs that have overwhelmed vast chunks of formerly agricultural land on the Great Plains—am part of the problem rather than the solution. As an American suburbanite, I am automatically among the greatest resource-wasters on the planet. I drive more than my urban compatriots, for instance. I shop at chain stores too, and rely on commercial utilities for the heat that seeps out of my windows in winter, and eat foods grown so far away that the trucks that transport it spew tons of greenhouse gases into the sky.

The bad news: Someday I'm going to have to talk to my son Lucas about suburbia's role in environmental degradation. The good news: he's not quite two as I write this essay, so I have plenty of time to come up with a good story.

Environmentally-minded writers have discussed the development of agricultural land in our region so exhaustively that some I know refuse to broach the subject in polite conversation. Estimates in Colorado alone range from an acre an hour to an acre a minute. We all see the evidence surrounding us daily—new housing developments, new four-lane roads, new strip malls with the requisite grocery, gas, fast food, and liquor stores—and I don't want to add any more than necessary to the depressing litany of evidence or to the justified chorus of lament. Instead I want to talk about how I'm trying to raise Lucas (and his forthcoming sibling) in the ever-expanding Great Plains suburbs without simply acquiescing to the idea that he, simply by virtue of where he lives, must be part of the problem rather than the solution.

My first step in that program is teaching him to garden. This is a euphemism, as there is very little you can actually teach toddlers about gardening. But what you can teach them is love for the physical world they inhabit—something that may have been standard for earlier generations, but is no longer standard (or even common) today. So I show Lucas that plants have identities, characters. Cacti must be avoided, as evidenced

by the pricks to our fingers when we touch them together. Most plants should be left in the ground, though bindweed and henbit can be plucked from it mercilessly, since they will inevitably grow back anyway. Lamb's ear is meant to be stroked but not plucked, and apples don't get picked until they turn red. I show him what rain does to the ground, what lack of rain does to the ground, which birds like to eat which plants, which insects bite or sting. I show him as many different kinds of clouds and sky and wind as I can describe.

Ever since I started taking Lucas out to our backyard garden I have been explaining these things to him, no matter how much or how little he understands, because I can't think of any better way to communicate a sense of nature than showing him that he lives in the middle of it. That, to me, is the big challenge in raising children in suburbia: making sure they know that nature is something that surrounds them, rather than something they have to get in a car and drive to see. Just because I grew up with the idea that home is in here and nature is something out there to be enjoyed on trips specifically designed for the purpose—as most of my generation did—doesn't mean that I have to replicate the same fundamental error in my children.

This approach to child-rearing requires some re-training for me and my wife. Rather than driving to the foothills and taking the dog for a hike, we make ourselves hang around in our backyard more. We "help" Lucas pull weeds, or transplant dirt from one planting pot to the next, or count how many different colors of purple grow in summertime. This is far less aerobic than our former outdoor activities, but it exposes Lucas to all sorts of life and death: poppies sprouting in May, dried up by June; sunflowers growing from the size of his thumbnail to giants three times his height; morning glories snaking among the stalks of those sunflowers and dragging them down to the earth; worms eaten by starlings after the rain; moths caught in spider webs; grasshoppers jumping all through summer, but so still by early November that they refuse to crawl off your hand when you pick them up.

We call our backyard the Charles Darwin Garden, because survival of the fittest rules—our futile extirpation of bindweed and henbit excepted, of course. We fantasize that giving Lucas a taste of wildness in his slice of suburbia will teach him respect for living things, for the cyclical nature of earth, and for nature as

something he has a relationship with—something he has to care about rather than simply utilize, as if it had been created for his personal enjoyment. Is that something unreasonable to expect? Must we, simply because we live in the suburbs, condemn ourselves to raising our children as mindless resource-wasters who don't care about the world around them? As people who will drive away from town to "get their share" of public lands, then drive right back? I don't think so. I'm betting on the idea that Lucas and his forthcoming sibling can grow into adults who care about their relationship with the earth, and who help others do the same.

So we let Lucas dig no matter how much of a mess he makes. We let him pull apples off the trees when they're ready (and sometimes before). We call him to the window

when birds come to eat sunflower seeds or earthworms. We show him how things in the yard change throughout the year, show him who takes all the seeds and berries, show him what happens to leaves after they stay on the ground over winter. And we hope enough of it gets through that he'll come into adulthood knowing that he lives in nature—rather than in a house built in 1986, surrounded by other houses of the same vintage, that obscure his view of some external thing that others call nature.

"Squirrel jump," Lucas said the other day as we sat outside watching one clamber up a fence with a shriveled apple it had grabbed from beneath our tree. "Squirrel hungry. Squirrel go home."

Which made me think the plan must be working, at least for now.