



## Dad and the Fantasticks

*Our fathers' friendship. By Erica Fire*



My father's favorite musical was "The Fantasticks." He loved to sing:

*Plant a carrot, get a carrot,  
Not a Brussels sprout.  
That's why I love vegetables,  
You know what you're about.*

Dad, by the way, was a chemistry teacher who couldn't carry a tune. I am a theater professional who doesn't like musicals.

Dad was also a gardener, an avid gardener. I'm not sure I tasted a grocery store tomato before my teens.

As a child, I had no patience for gardening. But then halfway through college, I was struck by a realization: I wanted a job in

theater that allowed me to live in a house with a garden—not cooped up in a tiny New York City apartment.

That wasn't my only surprise in those years. When I left for college, I intended to find work and a life far from where I grew up. I never expected to find love in the next town over—and stay in the place I had put so much energy into leaving.

Not long after I met the man who became my husband, we introduced our parents to each other. Actually, they were practically neighbors. Thus began a lifelong friendship for all four of them—but especially for our fathers.

My German-heritage father, “Dad,” had perfected seed-starting. My Italian father-in-law, “Pops,” was a master urban gardener. They soon began two-man plant exchanges. When Pops gave Dad his first seed garlic, he called the variety “German stiff neck,” which Dad admitted was probably redundant. In turn, Dad gave Pops some hot red peppers, which he called “Godfather peppers.”

When my husband and I finally bought a house with land I could garden, both our fathers gave us plenty of advice and help. At that point, Pops was in his 80s, so each Spring Dad would start seeds for his own garden, mine, and Pops's.

I learned from my father how to compost and mulch and from my father-in-law to add mussel and clamshells to the compost. Both of them taught me to plant tomatoes deep, buried to their first true leaves. Although they were a decade and a half apart in age, they died within only a few years of each other. I miss them both like crazy and think of them all the time, but especially in October when I plant garlic. I continue to plant the descendants of the garlic given by Pops to Dad and later passed from Dad to me. After more than 20 years, we have probably bred our own strain.

It was nearly impossible to get Pops to go to live theater. But my husband and I finally saw “The Fantasticks” with Mom and Dad. At the end, my husband remarked, “No wonder your dad loves this story so much. It isn't about the young couple at all.

“It's about the friendship between the fathers.” ❖

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