

Stewardship of the Soil: The Gardens We Command

By Chaplain Tom Azar

Every one of us is issued a garden at birth. We don't choose the acreage, and we don't choose the terrain. Some are given vast, fertile plots; others are handed a small patch of rocky soil in the wilderness. Some of us work in the shade of ease, while others labor under the intensive heat of trial.

I learned the value of the "small plot" growing up in Queens, New York. My parents' garden was modest, but it was productive. It yielded the tomatoes and scallions that went into our school sandwiches every day. It wasn't a sprawling estate, but it was theirs, and they tended it with discipline.

Today, tending my garden in the mountains, I've found I have a better hand for flowers than for food. But the lesson remains: It is not the size of the plot that matters, but what you do with what you've been dealt with.

The Choice of Cultivation: In the military, we talk about "blooming where you are planted." As officers, we are the direct result of the choices we make within our assigned AO. Some choose to give up when the soil is hard, letting the weeds of cynicism take over. Others work the ground, producing a life marked by a strong marriage, physical readiness, and deep-rooted friendships.

When I look at my own "earthly garden," I see the crops I chose to prioritize:

1. Education: Constant mental sharpening.
2. Family: The bedrock of my support system.
3. Faith: The center of my gravity.

The Final Inspection: We are all familiar with inspections. We prepare for them with rigor, knowing that our work will be judged by a higher authority. At the end of my life, there will be a final inspection. The Great Harvester will not look at the gardens of others to compare; He will look at the fruits of my labor.

As I conduct an After-Action Review (AAR) of this past year, I choose to focus on the flowers rather than the thorns. I choose to remember the vibrant sunsets

rather than the storm clouds, and the fruit that stayed on the branch rather than that which fell and rotted. I am profoundly grateful for the "crop" I have been blessed with my spouse, my children, and my sisters.

The Premium Fertilizer: A life well-lived is rooted in God. In professional terms, we might say He is the "premium fuel" for our operations. He alone heals the damage of the seasons, guides the growth, and restores the soil.

Ultimately, we must remember a fundamental truth of our "commission": we do not own the land. We are merely stewards of the garden He formed. It all belongs to Him.

Strategy for this Rewrite: Command Presence: Used words like stewardship, AO, center of gravity, and AAR to speak the language of a professional officer.

Metaphor Extension: Linked the "inspection" of the garden to the military inspections and evaluations officers face throughout their careers.

Perspective: Kept the Queens, NY anecdote to ground the piece in your personal history, which builds "rank" and credibility with the reader.

Would you like me to try a version that focuses more on the "Final Inspection" aspect, perhaps as a metaphor for a change of command?

This is a beautiful and relatable metaphor. For a chaplain, the "Garden of the Soul" imagery is a classic way to connect the physical world with spiritual growth.

I've smoothed out the transitions, corrected the grammar, and elevated the language to feel a bit more reflective and "pulpit-ready" while keeping your personal voice.

Revised Reflection: The Stewardship of the Garden: Everyone is born with a garden. It is a gift given at birth, though the landscape varies for us all. Some are granted expansive acreage while others receive a small plot. Some inherit rich, dark soil, while others must work with ground that is rocky or thin. Some

gardens flourish in the dappled shade, some endure the intensity of the midday sun, and others still must be carved out of the wilderness.

I remember my parents' garden in Queens, New York. It was small, but it was vibrant with tomatoes, lettuce, and scallions. I can still taste the lettuce and tomato sandwiches we took to school every day - simple meals on Silvercup white bread, grown from the earth and packed with love.

Today, I will try to keep my own garden going here in the mountains. I've found that I have a better hand with flowers than vegetables, but the lesson remains the same: it isn't about what you were dealt with, but what you do with the land you have. Some people give up on their plot and walk away. Others choose to till the soil, tending to it until it yields a life of meaning - good marriages, robust health, and deep friendships. I know that I am the harvest of the choices I have made.

I often ask myself: What did I choose to plant in my earthly garden? For me, the seeds of education, family, and the Church have been the vital nutrients that shaped the landscape of my life.

I know that at the end of my journey, there will be an inspection. The Harvester will come to see the fruits of my labor. As I look back over this past year, I am learning to focus on the blossoms rather than the thorns. I choose to remember the radiance of the sunsets rather than the dark, rainy clouds. I give thanks for the fruit that stayed on the tree until the harvest, rather than mourning what fell to the ground and rotted. Most of all, I thank the Lord for the blessing of my sisters, my spouse, and my children.

A life well-lived must be rooted in God. He alone heals, guides, restores, and loves us. If our life is a garden, then God is the premium fertilizer - the life-force for the soil He first formed. Ultimately, it is all His; we are simply the stewards of His grace.

Everyone has a garden. It's given to you with birth. What you do with it is the result of your life choices. Some have large gardens, some get small. Some

have good soil and other mediums. Summer in the shade some intensive heat summer out in the wilderness.

I remember growing up my parents had a garden in Queens New York. It was small but it had tomatoes lettuce scallions. It helped make our lettuce and tomato sandwiches for school every day on white bread silver cup.

I try to keep my garden going up here in the mountains, but I do better with flowers. no matter what you have been dealt with in life. It's what you do with it that matters. Some just give up and walk away. Some work it grows things have a great life. Good marriage, good health, good friends. I know I am the result of the choices I made.

What did I want to put in my earth garden? Education, family Church these are vital aspects that show the garden I have created.

I will get an inspection at the end of my life. The harvester will see the fruits of my labor.

As I look over this year I try to focus on the flowers in my garden and not the thorns, I remember the beautiful sunsets and not the clouds were dark and rainy, and I remember the fruit that stayed on the tree till the end and not that which fell to the ground and rotted. And I thank my Lord for my wonderful sister's spouse and children

A life well lived is rooted in God. He alone heals, guides and restores and loves us. God is the premium fuel fertilizer for the garden He formed. It's all His. We are just stewards.