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Opinion: Now I understand my parents' devotion to il giardino.

It would have been easier to just buy vegetables at Steinberg's, but the garden was an important part of who they were.

Ralph Mastromonaco • Special to Montreal Gazette

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"I can still see the repurposed hockey sticks holding up the tomato plants and beanstalks," Ralph Mastromonaco writes.

PHOTO BY JULIE OLIVER /
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Autumn always evokes memories for me, memories of the backyard gardens that were a constant growing up Italian in the Montreal of an earlier era.

I can still see the repurposed hockey sticks holding up the tomato plants and beanstalks. And the rows of peppers, eggplants, cucumbers, carrots, lettuce, parsley and basil.

In my younger years, I did not understand why my parents put all that time and effort into keeping a garden that produced vegetables they could have easily bought at Steinberg's. I came to realize that the garden had more to do with who they were.

Like most Italian immigrants, my parents had an agrarian background. That explained practices that did not align with their urban reality in the country they came to call home.

Why they were early risers and grew their own vegetables, made their own wine, their own pasta, taralli and biscotti. Why the concrete space under the entrance steps of our homes became the cantina, where they stored everything they made themselves: prosciutto, capicollo and sausages hanging from the ceiling, cheese, fermenting mosto in demijohns, finished wine in gallon jugs and one-litre bottles, jars of tomato sauce, eggplants, mushrooms and giardiniera in oil.

It also explained why the patience of waiting for things came naturally to them. Their lives had been about planting seeds, nurturing crops and then eventually harvesting their produce, God willing.

Our parents came from a land of timeless beauty. But after the Second World War, life in Italy was marred by scarcity: of land, food, water, but, most significantly, of opportunity. Italian immigration to Canada is the story of the journey from scarcity to abundance.

The immigrant quest for abundance was and remains to this day the quest for opportunity that brings that better life.

Love and devotion to family sustained our journey in Canada from scarcity to abundance.

In Italy, my parents were farmers, as were their parents and their parents' parents.

There is nothing wrong with being a farmer. But my parents came to Canada so that I did not have to be a farmer if I did not want to be.

Today, backyard gardens are still kept by Montreal Italians in their sunset years who continue to take pride in toiling the earth and sharing its bounty with family, friends and neighbours.

Although younger generations are less inclined to work the gardens as their parents or grandparents once did, many still do, or plant scaled down homage versions of what they fondly remember.

For myself and countless others of my generation, Canada kept its promise of opportunity. And for that I will always be grateful.

But the memory of our giardino ensures that I will never forget where I came from.

Ralph Mastromonaco is a Montreal criminal defence lawyer.