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## A Garden Cures Rootlessness

By LARY BLOOM

GUILFORD

AS the garden season begins, you may consider a different view of pepper or tomato plants than in springs past. If so, you may notice something of familial roots from, say, Warsaw or Bangkok or a Pueblo reservation. You can do this if you examine what you sow from the perspective of Patricia Klindienst, 55, master gardener and discoverer of universal histories in the soil.

But it will be best if you sidestep Ms. Klindienst's specific path from horticultural illiterate ("I didn't know the difference between an annual and a perennial") to author of an eloquent book on gardening, "The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic America." This volume offers readers not a hint of "how to" but lots of "why to," featuring profiles of gardeners throughout the country who, by planting and harvesting, maintain ethnic identity and heritage.



To take the author's precise path to these soul-affirming gardens, you would have to first suffer many personal setbacks — including untimely deaths of family members (including a 41-year-old brother), miscarriage, illness and divorce. You would

voluntarily relinquish a tenure-track position at Yale to pursue a life so basic that paying a cellphone bill would be beyond your capacity.

It was 13 years ago, after such a spate of misfortune, that Ms. Klindienst moved from Chester to a ground-floor apartment in Guilford, a shoreline town not known for attracting the newly poor. She hadn't doubted her decision to leave campus politics behind. "At Yale, you are lined up like bowling pins," she said. "I knew that though I couldn't bring back the dead or otherwise change what happened to me, I could control where and how I worked."

She intended to stay only a few months at the Guilford apartment. But she was too busy writing stories and essays and lining up adjunct teaching gigs (Wesleyan, Trinity and Connecticut College, as well as Yale) to move. And soon, despite her gardening ignorance and a crisis of confidence, she was on her hands and knees digging holes with a silver soup spoon she's had since childhood, and putting in an herb garden.

She had suffered much loss and given up the idea of having her own children and grandchildren. But gardening allowed her, for the first time, to "get out of my head and into my body." Suddenly, she was no longer alone. She found in the soil a connection to her late father, an accomplished gardener, that had been otherwise elusive.

And her plantings attracted a menagerie, including sparrows and finches that helped spread the seed. When her first tiny crop appeared, she understood that despite of all of the death around her, she could still rejoice over a miracle of life.

In 1996, Ms. Klindienst enrolled in [UConn's](#) master gardening course. The book she would eventually write was inspired by that and an old photograph she had seen at her father's funeral.

In it, her mother held a newspaper that referred to the executions of two avowed anarchists, the shoemaker Nicola Sacco and the fish peddler Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italian immigrants put to death in 1927 for murders they most likely did not commit.

To Ms. Klindienst, there was something about the case, given her Italian heritage (on her mother's side), that attracted her. This was particularly so when she discovered one of Vanzetti's jailhouse letters. He wrote, in part, "As for our garden, it takes a poet of the first magnitude to worthy speak of it, so beautiful, so unspeakably beautiful, it is."

Though the defendants were doomed, Vanzetti's garden would live on because Patricia Klindienst, a Ph.D. in modern thought and literature from Stanford and a national authority on Virginia Woolf, would keep it alive — on instinct and pluck. Though she had no literary agent or book contract, she traveled the country for three years to gather stories of immigrant gardeners, and, in doing so, she reaffirmed her own identity and sense of well being.

This month, Beacon Press brings out the paperback edition of "The Earth Knows My Name." Ms. Klindienst will continue working on a sequel, on the European philanthropist Maurice de Hirsch and a young man he helped, Avram Spiwack, who gardened his way out of Russia and into the United States.

The author's calendar remains crowded. At 3 p.m. on April 21, for example, she will talk at the New Haven public library about her chapter on the Gullahs — blacks in South Carolina who had their own language and garden ethic. "I wanted to do this as a gift to the African-American community — to tell them of a heritage that says a lot about endurance and survival — and how extremely creative these people were in keeping their culture alive," she said.

Endurance, survival, extremely creative — words that also apply to a gardener of a rented plot in Guilford where honeysuckle, butterfly bushes and a pear tree, affirmations of achievement past and present, will blossom once again.

*E-mail: conn@nytimes.com*