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**TINY GREEN THUMBS**

**By Arleen M. Kaptur**

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Gardening is considered one of America's greatest pastimes. People enjoy going out and communing with nature. They like the feel of the earth between their fingers and the excitement of seeing tiny sprouts and plants opening up to drink in the sunshine and the warmth. It just makes you feel good inside.

How about letting your child experience the joys of gardening? No matter where you live, you can introduce gardening and the miracle of plant life to your child. They will thrill to see their seeds sprout and grow. That very first strawberry, pickle, or parsley leaf will bring true delight and amazement to them. You would be instilling in your child a love of nature, an appreciation for life, and the knowledge that with a little work and care, you can grow food, flowers, and other things of beauty.

Begin with small, fast-growing plants. A child's attention span is still limited so long, slow growth may lose its appeal. Strawberry plants are a perfect way to introduce your child to the wonder of how that ruby-red berry in his/her cereal grew. A small patch of ground that will allow the plant to grow and spread its "fingers" will amaze your child with each day's accomplishments. Then when that first flower appears, the prospect of a strawberry grows, and then finally that first berry becomes a reality. Aw, the taste of the first berry you ever grew contains untold feelings of victory.

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Other great plants are cucumber, parsley, lettuce, green onions, and yes, even a corn stalk or two. If space is limited, try container gardening. Even something as simple as a large coffee can with holes in the bottom for drainage, some good soil, and the wonder begins. Allow your child to do the work – water, weed, and care for the plant. If you do everything, then the accomplishment he/she feels will not be the same. A tiny hand can hold a small watering can, and it can pick out pesky weeds. Bright, little eyes will glow with each new growth until harvest

time arrives. Lettuce can be picked for suppertime, and that salad will take on a whole new meaning.

Older children can be given more space and a wider variety of plants to choose from. Carrots, beets, green peppers, and pumpkins are sure–fire choices. Whatever the age of your child, they can begin to enjoy the joys of gardening right alongside their mom or dad. Please have a camera ready when they see that first "success".

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### **Thumbs Up**

**By LeAnn R. Ralph**

Do you remember how sensitive you felt about being "different" in some way when you were kid?

Maybe you were shorter than your classmates. Or taller. Or had darker hair, or lighter hair. Or maybe you wore glasses.

Well...my difference was thumbs. That's right, thumbs.

I know it sounds silly, but for a long time I envied the other girls who had petite thumbs. And yet, it wasn't until we were completing a class project one day in elementary school that I realized just how

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"different" mine were.

The teacher had divided us into three groups, and each group was supposed to decorate a bulletin board with a winter scene.

My group had decided to make snowmen, and since every snowman needs eyes, nose and a mouth, we elected to use thumb tacks.

I had just pushed in the first tack when a girl from my group spoke up.

"What happened to your thumb?" she asked.

Thinking maybe I had cut myself on a piece of paper, I examined my thumb carefully.

It looked fine to me.

"Nothing," I said. "Why?"

She held up her thumb.

"Put yours beside mine," she instructed.

So I did.

My thumb was about half the length of hers and twice as wide.

"Look at this," she called to the others in the group.

They compared our thumbs for a few seconds — and then the questions started.

"Did they get smashed in a car door?"

"Did they get hit with a hammer?"

"Did somebody flatten them with a rolling pin?"

As far as I knew, nothing like that had ever happened.

"No," I said. "They've always been this way."

The other kids glanced back and forth amongst themselves.

"Maybe you should ask your mom," one of them suggested.

So I did.

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"What do you mean, what happened to your thumbs?" my mother inquired after I had gotten off the school bus that afternoon. "Nothing happened to them."

Which was what I had been afraid she would say. Somehow, I was hoping she would have a long, drawn-out story about a freak accident that I couldn't remember.

"Are you SURE I didn't get them stuck in the car door when I was really little?" I asked.

Mom shook her head. "No...no...nothing like that ever happened." Then her eyes narrowed. "Is that what the other kids have been saying?"

I nodded.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she muttered.

Mom paused, brow furrowed. "Okay," she said. "What do you use your thumbs for?"

I considered the question.

"Holding my pencil."

"And what else? How about setting the table? And...tying your shoes?"

I thought for a moment. "And combing my hair."

"Picking up a glass," Mom said.

"Holding a book," I said.

"Opening a door," she said.

"Drinking from a cup," I said.

"Buttoning a shirt," she said.

"Pushing in thumb tacks," I said.

"Zipping a zipper..."

We went on like this for several minutes until we both ran out of ideas.

"So what's the problem?" Mom asked finally. "Don't YOUR thumbs work just as well as everybody else's?"

Now that she mentioned it, they did work just as well.

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"And haven't you ever noticed Dad's thumbs?"

I shook my head.

"Well, you should. Yours are just like his."

And she was right. True, Dad's hands were much bigger than mine, but his thumbs looked just exactly like mine.

After that I stopped envying all the girls who had petite, narrow, pretty thumbs, and when anybody asked what had happened to mine I'd say, "Nothing. They're just like my dad's."

My father was a farmer, and he used his thumbs to do many things — helping a calf be born, building hay wagons, overhauling the tractor, baling hay, planting crops, fixing fences. He also used his thumbs while planting the garden, making ice cream from scratch, building a swing for me from rope from the hay mow, picking up newborn kittens so I could see them, teaching me how to drive the tractor, going fishing with me, showing me how to put a saddle on my pony. . .

As far as I was concerned, there wasn't a thing in the world Dad couldn't do or fix, so if those kinds of thumbs were good enough for him — they were good enough for me, too.

And you know what? They still are.

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LeAnn R. Ralph is the author of the book, *Christmas in Dairyland (True Stories from a Wisconsin Farm)* (August 2003). She is working on her next book, *Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam*, which will be available later in 2004. Share the view from Rural Route 2 and read sample chapters and other Rural Route 2 stories at

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