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Editorial notebook: Fallow ground

By Stuart Leavenworth -

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Winter is a season of discontent on our forlorn, fallow farm plot. My wife and I started tending this plot in March near our home in midtown Sacramento. All summer and fall and deep into November, it sustained us with a bumper crop of tomatoes, squash, pumpkins, melons, beans, peppers and eggplants. Now it sits lonely, dusted with frost, with only some straggly Swiss chard to keep it company.

My tiny farm plot is part of the eerie skeletal landscape of the Central Valley in winter. Mile upon mile of the world's most productive farmland is taking a frigid holiday. Orchards of naked trees, their boughs empty of leaves, stand silhouetted against the crisp December sky. These trees look like soldiers, stripped of their uniforms, awaiting the marching orders that only spring can bring.

Farmers will tell you that extended cold is vital for many kinds of fruit trees, producing cherries and oranges that are sweeter and brighter in color. The winter period is also good for farmers. Unless it floods, hails or freezes too hard, this is a rare period of calm when they can check their books, prepare their taxes, do research, fix equipment or take a vacation to Hawaii. Yet for most of us small-time vegetable gardeners, winter is a grim period.

The only therapy for the owner of a fallow farm plot is to germinate some seeds. Ours arrived a few weeks ago from an artist friend who lives in the Tehachapis. Each year, she studiously preserves her seeds. This year, she kindly sent us some gems, packed in old makeup jars, labeled arugula, mustard greens, leeks, shallots and so on. Their little sprouts have now emerged from the soil tray, renewing hope that winter will soon pass and a new season will bloom.

People who like to dig in the dirt do so only partly for the resulting greenery. For gardeners and weekend anglers, the time spent outdoors is a welcome moment of solitude and contemplation, often hard to find in a busy world.

I was reminded of this while meeting recently with U.S. Rep. George Miller of Contra Costa County. Miller has been in Congress since 1974, but to my surprise, he still finds the time to fish and boat in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

"I look at these places as a public mental health ward," Miller said with a laugh.

"These are places where you can get away with your family, or in some cases, get away from your family. You always imagine what these guys are thinking, as they sit in their boats, not a fish in sight, happy as can be."

My wife and I feel the same way about our garden plot. It is our sanctuary and a place of sustenance, even in cold times like this.

-- Stuart Leavenworth

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