

2022 Short Story & Essay Contest: Second Place, Adult Essay Contest

Volunteer Tomatoes

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It was July 2021 and I was in a funk. Here we were, on the cusp of some semblance of normalcy after more than a year of COVID-19, when the Delta variant threw us all for a loop. For some reason, I took it particularly hard.

One morning I decided to finally tackle the weeds out front. I pulled pokeweed and crabgrass, a bit of clover.

Next to the garage was a tangled mess of a plant, about 2 feet high and 4 feet long. It sure looked like a weed; it was unsightly. I crouched to grab it and pull the thing out—and stopped. There were a couple of little red balls hanging from it. And they looked like *tomatoes*.

I am not a gardener; any flowers I've planted usually end up in a deer buffet. And I've never tried to grow food. But these sure looked like cherry tomatoes.

To confirm my suspicions, I asked a gardener friend, who verified that my ungainly specimen was indeed a cherry tomato plant. She graciously popped one of the red balls into her mouth to prove she wouldn't keel over.

It turns out that tomatoes that appear out of nowhere and sprout unplanned are called volunteer tomatoes. Evidently some people don't like them. They encroach on other plants and can grow in unwanted places.

I was smitten. I checked my volunteers every few days to harvest any that were newly ripe. They were perfect: round, juicy, and sweet. Every time I passed the plant—to get the mail, take out the trash—I'd stop and smile at them.

I didn't dare do anything to it; the plant clearly had a mind of its own and didn't need me to help it grow. I did buy netting to cover it. I didn't want to share my unexpected gift with our local fauna.

How did I end up with the good fortune of volunteer tomatoes? I know it was simply luck, but it was kind of nice to think that they chose to flourish next to my garage. And we're all entitled to a bit of good luck.

That little rogue plant didn't yield a lot; maybe 50 to 60 cherry tomatoes. But it kept producing fruit until the end of November.

And it took me out of my funk. Good things can thrive in unexpected places. There is something positive out there.

I took the last remaining tomatoes that hadn't ripened and planted them along the entire side of the garage. I'm hoping that my volunteers will agree to stay awhile.

Volunteer tomatoes? More like hero tomatoes. This little plant was a happy constant for a few months, something to look forward to.

In a world of uncertainty, fear, and anger, it's heartening that even a small thing—as small as a cherry tomato—could make an outsized impact, at least for one person.

And to think I almost pulled it out.