

Inside we are vegetable

What you can learn from Mother Nature and the vegetable world.

Allow me to start with a story. Oregon has some of the most beautiful, and deserted beaches on the western seaboard. I have spent many happy vacations beachcombing along its shores, enjoying the sense of peace and solitude. On one of these walks, my way took me past a sewage outlet pipe. While I would normally have hurried straight past without a second glance, on this occasion something caught my eye, a flash of red. Amongst the unpromising conditions of untreated human waste, was a single red tomato plant, proudly bearing fruit. Clambering over, I saw that one of the tomatoes looked like it might be ripe – a gentle squeeze between thumb and forefinger confirmed my suspicions. Gently, I plucked it from the vine, held it to my lips and bit into it. To this day, this is the tastiest, most flavorsome tomato I have ever had the pleasure of eating. It struck me then that there were two valuable lessons to be learnt that day:

1. See beyond your surroundings, and you will flourish;
2. Always be on the lookout for the unexpected opportunity.

When I got home at the end of that week, that tomato stayed with me. I did some research, and what I found opened my mind. Let me share that with you. The tomato seed is covered with a protective layer of mucous-like jelly, which makes it remarkably immune to its surroundings. The seed that germinated into my particular plant had probably started its journey somewhere in a grocery store in downtown Portland. Once ingested, the amazing part of the journey began. It survived the double assault of grinding molars and salivary juices. It then traveled through the stomach, resisting digestive enzymes that would strip the meat from a bone, before being expelled into the foregut. From there, it passed slowly along the small and large intestine, traversing hundreds of feet of colon: all the while fending off a battery of assaults designed by the human body to break down its defenses and absorb its nutrients. Finally, it was expelled via the anus and flushed down the toilet. Through the sewerage treatment and transportation system it then made its way for several days, along miles and miles of piping – all of it awash with human effluvia and the other detritus of animal and vegetable waste.

Undeterred, our seed finally emerged at the sewerage outlet pipe, at the place where our story began. Seizing its opportunity, it buried itself just below the surface, making use of that same sewage that we wrinkle our noses at. My instinct had been

to hurry past, blindly – but our friend sensed the potential of the situation. Sure enough, in time it sprouted, raising a green tendril proud of its surroundings. It set down roots, took hold, drew up nutrients. In time, it became a fine plant, capable of bearing fruit, and willing to see beyond its confines. This is the key point, so I'll say it again. *Willing to see beyond its confines*. The only difference between most of us and that tomato seed was its ability to see beyond its immediate surroundings and change the course of its future. That seed was not put off by the difficulty of its journey. Mr Failure makes that same journey, and thinks to himself, *That's it – that's my place in life, why even try when nobody around me has done any good?* Mr Successful thinks, *Great – I've had a pretty rough ride so far, but now I've found myself in some pretty rich soil with not much competition: the future's big, real big!* At that moment, I knew exactly what kind of tomato seed I was.

And the other lesson? Well, I nearly walked right on past. If I hadn't stopped, I would never have tasted that tomato, and I would never have gotten to thinking about the valuable lesson the tomato seed can teach us. I often wonder what happened to the seeds from the tomato that I ate that day: I certainly can't walk past a sewage outlet pipe without a pang of curiosity, and a hopeful glance.

Not convinced? I was approached a few years back by a young guy from a disadvantaged background. He had come through some pretty tough early years – his personal sewerage system – and felt himself dumped at life's outlet pipe. After hearing me give a seminar, he approached me and we took a coffee together. He was clearly enthused by what he had heard, and ready to resume his own personal growth, but I just sensed he needed a little more nurturing. I told this young man my story of the tomato, and it really hit home. "I know now what's been holding me back! I'm actually in pretty good soil, I just didn't see it yet." That same fellow is now doing pretty good – within weeks, he had doubled his personal turnover, and is now running his own division.

Over these next pages, I will share the valuable lessons we can learn from the vegetable world of Mother Nature. Often, like our friend the tomato seed, these lessons can be taken from the most unlikely and surprising sources.