About your birthday present:

To begin with, I had too much yard. Obviously, I couldn't even consider having it all as grass; it would be far too much to mow. So I started a garden.

I did everything wrong. It was the wrong time of the year to plant; the soil was solid rock; the drainage was bad; and I didn't know the first thing about gardening. In California the tomatoes grew wild. I liked that. I'd got used to having homegrown tomatoes. I didn't know that it was so difficult to grow them.

But I tried anyway. Good dirt was imported from the hinterlands. Then a generous helping of peat moss and bark mulch and it looked presentable. By the time that was done, it was much too late to plant anything.

But I did anyway.

And things grew. Sort of.

It was the hottest and driest summer on record. My plants and I labored thru the worst of it. I apologized for planting them so late that they didn't have a fair chance. I watered them often. They survived.

I read a few books. I was still doing everything wrong. I added more mulch. I remade the rows. I picked the leaves from the bottom of the tomato plants. (I should have done it sooner.) I started watering correctly.

It all helped some.

Linda went to a lecture. She came back and told me that I'd planted too close together, and that I might as well pull up the plants that weren't bearing and wait till next year. I had to agree.

So, about a month ago I dedicated a hot Sunday afternoon to the task of chopping down the great experiment. I pulled up about half the plants, leaving only those that actually had some tomatoes growing on them. Those, I staked up again.

One particular plant was so puny that I hadn't expected it to last at all. I had given it the poorest spot, saving the best for the healthier looking specimens. But as I started to pull it up, I noticed that it had the beginnings of a tomato, so I left it.

I took one of the cages from the plants I'd pulled up and put it around the tiny plant. Then I remade the hill it was in and put a lot more mulch around the roots. I gave it a good drink and, for good measure, a bit of fertilizer. (Organic, of course.)

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So, I thought, "What a perfect birthday present for Mamaw!" This perfect tomato, organically grown, pesticide free, a product of only sun and soil and water and love; a glorious culimnation of an extra long season.

Of course, it didn't work. Things like that never do, or so it seems.

Here it is, time for your birthday, and the perfect fruit, instead of being red and ripe and luscious is hard and green and not nearly ready to be picked. With the stubborn tenacity she demonstarted thru the long hot summer, my special plant now refuses to surrender her only offspring.

Linda had me covered as usual. She found a great little pocket mirror with a light on it. Just the thing for a little touch up at the opera. It even has a magnifying mirror, so you won't have to use your glasses. Really a nice, useful present. Much more practical than a tomato, no matter how beautiful.

So now, when you use the mirror, you can think of us. And when we eat the tomato, we'll think of you.

Happy Birthday, with love,

Jim and Linda and Charles and Claire.

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