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We Love Libraries!

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We Love LIBRARIES!

Looking at the title of this column, I am reminded of all the things that I love. The number of those things is large, but for some reason, my mind turns to tomatoes. I love homegrown, vine-ripened, juicy tomatoes! Since I grew up on a farm, I am passionate about trying to grow my own. Not having been very successful, I began to think of what I need to do to have great tomatoes. In turn, my thoughts went back to libraries and what part I can play in the effort to have great libraries.

For tomatoes, I need knowledge about the plant and knowledge about its growing process. If I love libraries and I want them to succeed, I need to know how they work, what it takes to develop the collections, how to best serve the patrons, what the staff members do and how to pay the bills. How and where can I find the information that puts aside all the fancy language about missions and goals and theories of change, and freezes the action into a particular moment that is unique to my task of planting the tomatoes or speaking for libraries?

Nurseries have good advice on tomato plants, appropriate soil conditions and the needed amounts of sunshine and fertilizer. For the libraries, I can talk to staff members, stay up on the news regarding issues and funding that impact libraries and understand who the individual and collective decision makers are in meeting libraries' needs. Learning how to overcome bad growing conditions for both tomatoes and libraries is certainly high on my list.

Next comes the translation step — buy the plants and put my knowledge into action. Or, in the case of libraries: 1) speak out; 2) get to know the decision makers/players on the various levels; 3) assemble the facts supporting my beliefs and wants; and 4) work out a plan to present my evidence in support/opposition of a law, an appropriation or a change of opinion. Many individuals feel that libraries are an essential service in maintaining a productive community. They are strong on libraries but not called to action. It might just be my passion that results in "conversion experiences" for the previously unconvinced. I cannot depend on one person or group to advocate for

libraries. It takes networking and teamwork to be a voice for libraries: professionals, trustees, friends groups and individuals. The mother who needs books on child-rearing or the entrepreneur who found information to determine the best location for his business can be just as powerful as those we elect, appoint or hire. These individuals have stories about loving libraries. I need to gather those stories and use them to feed my advocacy approaches, just as I use the fertilizer to feed my tomatoes.

Planting tomatoes in the right location and at the right time is a big deal. So is selecting the time and place to speak on behalf of libraries. Attending governmental meetings, calling on decision makers in their offices and chatting in lines at sporting events and grocery stores are all good locations. The time can be while lawmakers are in session or when they are in recess and on their home turf. Timing needs to be systematic and consistent, not just at a time of crisis or budget presentations. To do the best work, I need to know how the political process works. My message can't be too late to influence the vote. I must not waste the time of my elected officials discussing matters over which they have no jurisdiction.

Young tomato plants are tender; I need to handle them carefully. I also need to be nice to decision makers. I should not threaten or expect them to make a decision before they have all the facts. If I am visiting, I need to make an appointment and use the time wisely. I need to express appreciation for their time, consideration and their actions, even when they do not give me full support.

I need to be a resource in the local area, to become known as one of those people who, by doing research, can develop a reputation as a repository of good information. If I work on all these things, I should have a good crop and a good outcome. Now I need to just go do it! And I will as soon as I plant my tomatoes! ►►

— Jenny McCurdy

The author is director of Development and Alumni Services at Mercer University and serves on the DeKalb Library Foundation board. She is a past president of the Friends of Georgia Libraries.