

Globe and Mail, Facts and Arguments, July 23, 1998

The garden of delight

I was the most reluctant horticulturist.
Then I met Dorothy, an Englishwoman
with a thumb as green as they come.

I always thought gardens were a bother. For years, my husband handled all the “yard work”, as he called it. “I’ll be out back, taming nature,” he’d say, before going out to cut the grass. Except for a petunia or two, that was the extent of gardening at our house; he tried to keep the edges neat, and I tried to ignore the whole thing. It was hard enough keeping the kids alive and the house livable without adding another great big room - filled with leaves and bugs and backbreaking work - to my chores.

But then one day, the nature tamer didn’t live here any more. Suddenly it was all mine, the long green expanse of yard work. Forget it, I decided - not enough hours in the day; no idea where to begin. I bought a book called The Reluctant Gardener and was reluctant to read it.

Into my back forty, just in time, strode Dorothy. Our gardens were perpendicular, hers a stone’s throw, across my next-door neighbour’s unfenced yard, from mine. When she opened her back gate and pushed into my meadow of weeds and underbrush, she had found her cause, a canvas for her skill and enthusiasm. And a willing pupil there too, if a bit sluggish.

She’d been watching me, it turned out. Dorothy, an Englishwoman in her early sixties, had also been a single mother once, had had to cope alone with children, work, house and garden. She’d been good at all of them, though. “What’s this dreadful thing?” she would say, crouching on her haunches during her tour of inspection, pulling at some obnoxious weed. “Look, these are lovely, you must fertilize!” she’d say, scrabbling to rescue some limp shoots. “The poor little things won’t survive without moo poo.” “Water!” she’d cry, “Water water water.” I started to weed and prune; I bought fertilizer and a new hose, and I watered. Order began to emerge; not Versailles, but there was hope.

Then she directed her fierce gaze upward to my trees, pointing out which branches should be trimmed to let the sunlight in, and which trees should disappear entirely. “I like pretty trees,” she said, “but there are so many horrible, unnecessary trees.” One afternoon I cut down an unnecessary Manitoba maple with a handsaw, fueled by Dorothy’s certain approval. She exulted in the new light for my plants. Stern with pests like earwigs, squirrels, raccoons, and sun-stealing trees, she took joy in each tiny seedling.

“Oh look,” she’d gasp, kneeling suddenly, her nose an inch from the soil. “That datura has seeded itself. Isn’t it brilliant!”

We got into the habit of strolling to the corner store, which had recently, with laudable timing, transformed its parking lot into a garden centre. She helped me choose practical perennials, which might survive despite my ignorance and our climate. “Admire them all you want,” she warned as I swooned over the big blue delphiniums, “but they’re impossible.” If Dorothy couldn’t raise them, there was no chance for me. But bit by bit I planted clematis, lilies, astilbe, cosmos, wisteria, morning glory. Glorious.

Inevitably as we sat after garden work, two single women and a bottle of wine under a canvas umbrella, our conversation turned to domestic matters. Fifteen years older than I, she had a lot to say about raising healthy children, as well as plants. Her ex-husband had left her to raise two young girls and twin boys, now adults who keep a close eye on their mother’s wellbeing. Dorothy dotes on her two beloved grandchildren. Because her own family was spread around, she adopted us as a nearby substitute - mother, children, and greenery.

Last summer we planted a long row of tomato seedlings at the back, where our gardens would have intersected if my long-suffering neighbour hadn’t been in the way, and by late summer had a rich harvest. “You’ve become a real gardener,” she said, as we sat munching tomatoes and drinking in the star-bursts of purple and white clematis, the black-eyed susans, lavender, nicotiana, phlox, hydrangea; the rhododendron she had rescued from someone’s garbage, the sunflowers and wild sweet pea. I didn’t travel that summer; I mostly sat in the garden, and looked.

But the end of the summer brought devastation for Dorothy. A decade-old romance - “my beloved”, she called him, the love of her life - turned into heartbreak. Her back began to give her such pain that she reluctantly submitted to an operation that left her helpless for weeks and then in more pain than before. Walking with a limp when she could walk at all, and unable to bend down to garden, she realized she could no longer cope alone. In the winter, she and her married daughter sold their own homes and bought a big house together, on the other side of town.

And now, she’s recovering from an operation on her lung, enduring further tests, awaiting the diagnosis for her future. All this, from one summer to the next. When she found out she had cancer, she told me on the phone, she went out to rip dandelions from the lawn. “I think of them as a kind of cancer,” she said, “and I thought, ‘Right, I’ve got you lot!’”

For a long time, this spring, I couldn’t garden without her. What was the point? But then she recovered enough to visit, inspect and urge me on. We walked slowly to the corner store and up and down the fragrant aisles, while she commented on each plant and we chose a few. I began to weed and water; I even planted a tomato, only one. It’s hard to relish the loveliness Dorothy inspired in my garden, while she is in pain, and afraid.

What I need now is a buddleia. My friend loves buddleias, because after the war in London they sprouted miraculously out of bombed-out buildings, adding colour and delicate beauty to the rubble. She found one for me last year, and we planted it before she moved, but it didn’t survive the winter. I will plant a new buddleia in honour of

Dorothy who, I pray, will go on teaching me about colour and beauty, about patience, and sunlight, and the hard work that is love.

