

My Father's Gardens

By Gloria Hildebrandt

When I was eight we moved to the country where my father had all the space he wanted for gardens. He had two large curving beds beneath the windows at the front of the house, bordered by small rocks. He made an enormous vegetable garden on top of the septic system's weeping tiles. He created a flower garden at the south side of the house, bordering a low waterfall and stream he formed from the basement sump pump's run-off. He built an arching wooden bridge with handrails to cross the stream.

Within the large concrete patio, he had a circle bordered by clipped boxwood and filled with tulips in spring and tropical houseplants in summer, and a rectangle for a simple knot garden of boxwood and a plant with leaves in a contrasting colour, all neatly clipped. The patio

ended where the land dropped down abruptly about four feet. Here he built concrete steps and edged the slope on either side with low-growing evergreens. Over 50 years, their stems and branches grew thick and gnarly, with an ancient beauty.

On the sunken lawn he grew a carpet of thyme and planted dwarf fruit trees, rhododendrons and azaleas. They didn't do well here as the sunken lawn was flooded with spring meltwater for weeks but they did bloom with beautiful flowers. Next to the sunken lawn the ground rises sharply to a small hill. Escarpment rocks break out of the ground here, so my father developed a rock garden. It was a tremendous amount of work to maintain, as were all of these gardens, but for decades my father relaxed from running his business by tending them.

German Vegetables

I was required to help out

by weeding and harvesting vegetables and fruit. I hated it. I got dirty, it took forever in the heat with bugs crawling on my face, and I often seemed to be doing it wrong. I didn't even like eating a lot of the strange European vegetables: kohlrabi, white asparagus, tough lima beans, gooseberries, and green cabbage or kale before it became fashionable. I always loved sweet carrots fresh from the soil, peas eaten from the pod, yellow German potatoes roasted or in a vinaigrette salad, and the berries: raspberries, strawberries, red currants with milk and sugar, supplemented by wild blackberries that my mother picked from the rest of the acreage.

Although I hated working in my father's garden as a child, as soon as I had some earth of my own, I wanted to garden. I didn't know what I was doing, but I felt my way forward blindly, beginning with a raised-bed herb garden at my back door, then an island flower bed in the middle of my own thyme lawn.

Most of my plants came from my father's divisions and extras. Often in spring he would appear from next door with roots and flats of things, asking if I wanted them. I always did, even though I didn't know what they were. It didn't help that my father usually only knew their German and Latin names. I learned the English common

names from other sources. I was given bleeding hearts, columbines, primroses, dahlias, gladiolae and more. Once he gave me a Rose of Sharon which a nursery had mailed him as a substitute for hibiscus. Unacceptable to him, it has become a large tree in my front yard with prolific pink flowers early each autumn.

Gardening Skills

My father also had a greenhouse where he started all sorts of things from seed. He became my annual supplier of Italian vegetables that he didn't like: zucchini and plum tomatoes. He would shake his head as he delivered these foreign plants.

My father really knew how to garden. He knew how and when to apply manure. He divided and transplanted and renewed his beds when necessary. He was forever buying new plants and seed from increasingly specialized nurseries. He had control of his gardens, they didn't overwhelm him as they do me, although he decommissioned some of them as his energy decreased or his interests moved elsewhere.

I could have learned so much from him about gardening. I realize this acutely now that he's gone. But somehow, his passion for gardening was planted a little bit in me. Having grown up within fine gardens, I must feel a need to be surrounded by them. I'll bumble along, doing my best to keep up with my ambition to create the gardens I have in my mind.

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▲ Purple irises, blue columbines and coral bells passed on to me by my father. PHOTO BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT.