

My Mother's Garden

Laura C. Stevenson

"It was my mother's garden," I say when people admire it. Literally speaking, that's not true.

My mother's garden framed the lawn against the backdrop of the stone wall that separated it from the ruins of three barns and a barnyard overgrown with chokecherries and raspberries. The present garden includes that, but it extends most of the way around the house and into the old barn foundations. From there, it wanders through the now-civilized barnyard, turns the corner on the reverse side of my mother's garden wall, and follows a drainage ditch to cattails that settled in during the 1980s. Above them looms the "new" barn, built in 1961. On its south side, where for a decade the horses warmed themselves in the winter sunlight, wild roses and massed sunflowers compete for the fertile soil, while late-blooming lilacs look on with detachment. On the barn's north side, another lilac obscures the well cap, and struggling shade plants grow amidst the ghosts of dogs whose pen the barn once sheltered. Like the house, its land, and even the road that passes it, the garden has changed a great deal since my mother died, forty-four years ago.

But still I say, "It was my mother's garden." It's a matter not of identity but of inheritance. Though its legacy is invisible to passersby, to me, my mother's garden is filled with the spirits of trees, flowers, creatures, and people who have vanished into the realm of memory but still occasionally assert their claims.

In May, as I look out the kitchen window, I see not only the lilacs my mother planted too close to the house, but a transparent image of the overgrown flowering crab tree that I cut down 25 years ago, only to find it had been a gift to my parents from dear friends now long dead. Later in the summer, I look at the thyme by the back door and have a brief vision of the deep red wild roses my mother dug out of the side of the road during one of our first summers here and planted in cow manure so fresh that it burned their roots. My spade hits ledge a few inches down in the far corner

of the vegetable garden, and I suddenly see resurrected the stunted azaleas my mother tried to establish in the spot. There is no place I can dig, weed, or walk around the garden without seeing what used to be as well as what is.

I was not one of those children who loved gardening from her earliest days. I enjoyed picking flowers, and I liked placing bedding plants in their little holes, but I had other priorities. Like my mother's roles as supportive wife, gracious hostess, and indispensable club member, her garden was simply a backdrop against which I lived my own life. As for my mother, what she thought, what she felt, as she gardened, it never occurred to me to wonder, until I realized – secretly, angrily, guiltily – that she no longer gardened as she had.

Since the family never referred to her illness during its five-year course, it was easy to draw the desired conclusion, which was that it was a temporary inconvenience of little importance. Of this attitude, the garden was a visual demonstration. Mother's visits to the hospital might increase in frequency, but every summer her flowers bloomed in an unchanged, luxuriant cycle: bleeding hearts, irises, lupines, poppies, columbines, peonies, evening primroses, shasta daisies, roses, bee balm, monkshood, day lilies, black-eyed Susans, and finally the irrepressible spreading sunflowers. In a large separate plot secure inside a six-foot electric fence, lettuce, chard, spinach, peas, beans, tomatoes, corn, and zucchini flourished profusely. To the many people who admired the garden from a distance, all seemed to be well.

Behind the garden's beauties in those days was a courageous assertion of life. "As long as you have a garden, you have a future," wrote Frances Hodgson Burnett, and my mother, who shared the delights of *The Secret Garden* with all her daughters, understood the statement's truth at every level. But also behind the garden's beauties was an unreachable solitude, for the distance from which admiration was allowed also applied to its gardener. She wished still to be seen as the woman in shapeless black jeans and short-sleeved plaid shirt who lugged buckets of water to her new plants, stopping to smile across the valley at the distant green of the Boyds' mowing and Haystack's blue-gray silhouette. Closer observation, which revealed the vigorous body wasted by cancer, the voice reduced to a whisper through a scarred throat, the lovely face drawn in pain, the gardening stopped in half an hour by exhaustion, was a violation



Daughter returns to mother's roots

of her deepest wishes. Yet, as the unrelenting disease progressed, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the element of deception in the garden's glory.

During the unimaginable summers after my mother died, her absence was as visible as her presence had been before. There was no place my adolescent eyes could turn without encountering the garden's silent reproach for my inability to maintain her legacy of beauty, patience, and hospitality. The vegetable garden grew over in grass, and while my grown-up sisters' visits and my inexperienced weeding preserved the hardier flowers, each summer's efforts made it clearer that I was ineffectually cultivating a garden not my own. Finally freed by my father's remarriage to an avid gardener, I embraced the liberating promises of college and graduate school, embarked upon a professional career, and left Vermont behind me.

Or so I thought.

Twenty years after my mother's death, I returned, cut off from my professional world by inexplicable, escalating deafness. A stunned single mother with no job and no prospects, I had little left to offer my two daughters but my heritage.

The most conspicuous aspect of that heritage – the stable – had nothing to do with my mother, whose primary reaction to horses had been fear. But as I sorted through the papers in the barn loft, I came upon another aspect, of which I had been only dimly aware: my mother's five unpublished novels and her deeply ambitious college love letters to my father. Looking through my tears at the hopes and dreams recorded in the familiar handwriting, I saw for the first time the whole woman whom, at sixteen, I had seen only as Mother.

Gradually, as her example led me to experiment with novels of my own and her remembered steadfastness gave me courage

to return to teaching, the garden became an expression of the relationship that had been closed to us. Its weediness attested a much-distracted companionship, but its gradual expansion reflected her granddaughters' growing inclusion in the circle. When the mountain ash she had planted in the ell of the house died, my daughters divided the plot around its stump in half, and each girl started a garden of annuals. That was so attractive that the next year I dug the grass out of the whole ell and we planted

perennials. Some time later, we started a vegetable garden parallel to it. As my daughters grew up and moved on, plants from their grandmother's garden went with them, to bloom in warmer, more fertile soil.

The relationship slowly established and continued was temporarily threatened when injury to my hands and shoulders made it as difficult for me to garden as it had been for my mother in her last years. But miraculously, at nearly fifty, the age at which my mother received the diagnosis that became her death sentence, I met a man with the rare ability to see past disability and into a creative future.

By the time I reached fifty-four, the age at which my mother died, he had helped me build a garden that encircled the house. And as I move into the sixties my mother never saw, the love of my

husband and my daughters has created a worthy successor to the garden she started with such plans over half a century ago. It is still best seen from a perspective that obscures the weeds, spreading invaders, and uncut stems.

But every summer, my mother's garden blooms purple, yellow, orange, and white, in a legacy to all who, passing by, are touched by her continuing presence.

Author Laura C. Stevenson writes and gardens in Wilmington. She provided the photos to accompany this story



Three generations of daughters continue the tradition