

Gardening with Mary: Rebirth of a Northside Garden

by Carolyn Bastick

Dedicated to my beloved sons, Adam and Harry

Mary was the previous owner of my new Minneapolis home. I learned she had died that autumn, only sixty-nine, taken quickly by cancer. She was a gardener. An Army photographer. Her photograph filing cases (disappointingly empty) were to be left in the basement, too heavy to move. I was happy to allow them to remain in my keeping.

My move to this new home in 2017 was not planned. I was not supposed to be in Minnesota. The daughter of a British Army officer accustomed to the upheaval of military life, back in 1981 I had barely given a thought to the consequences of marrying an American and moving to the Twin Cities. Yet for over thirty-five years, I held England close to my heart, waiting for the day I could return.

And finally, it was time. As I prepared for this long-awaited repatriation, the father of my children assured me he approved of my departure. His doctor had declared him to be a veritable poster child for chemotherapy, surely, the ultimate positive prognosis. “Go to England, I’m fine!” he told me.

So, I went. With his perceived blessing. I did not understand then that his words were the hubris of a dying man. I had trusted him in this weighty matter because I had no choice. For to doubt him would be to accept the unacceptable—that my children would be left fatherless. That I would no longer simply be a divorced mother, but a single parent, with sole proprietorship of our boys as they stood poised on the brink of adulthood. Even after the divorce, we had raised our children collaboratively, equally involved in their lives. I could not imagine taking on this great responsibility alone.

Now, less than twenty-four months later, his death had brought me back to Minnesota in a rush. Even with my training, two transatlantic moves in as many years was brutal. A decision that had been in the making for over three decades was undone

in a heartbeat. I deserted my partner and my English family to be close to my grieving sons. Insecure and isolated in this unfamiliar single parent role, I would need to create yet another American home. I would have one more northern garden to nurture.

My first foray into gardening came decades before after we bought a very special bungalow in Minneapolis in which to raise our family; a neglected 1917 Sear's kit house charmingly called *The Ashmore*. Learning about its history and attempting to restore some of its grandeur rapidly became an obsession.

The Ashmore was built in the Craftsman style. It possessed an organic nature. Brown hues, low to the ground, a chimney and garage constructed of field stone. It sat nestled in its urban lot begging to be surrounded by beauty. I believe it was the blandness of *The Ashmore's* landscaping that spurred me on to take the plunge. Move that hosta. Dig out the soulless rows of shrubs, eradicate the plastic edging and weed control mesh. Make inroads into the lawn. I never looked back.

Americans, in my experience, hold this charming belief that if you are English and you create a garden that is pleasing to the eye, it is due solely to your heritage that it grows as it does. As if gardening is in the English DNA. I wish it were so!

Everything I know about gardening I have learned in Minnesota. Through trial and error and an unhesitating approach to moving plants. During my brief tenure in England, finally in a climate where I could grow year-round, I struggled in every respect. The garden centers, replete with their expansive gift shops and tea rooms, displayed rows and rows of sumptuously eye-watering plants and shrubs. I recognized virtually none of them. The English universally use botanical plant names. Common names, when applied, are frequently entirely different than those used in the States.

It took me months to understand that there was a reason why local retailers only offered a few varieties of daylily (my favorite plant.) I discovered to my horror that without being able to depend upon extended periods of hot weather, they were unreliable bloomers. One of my greatest joys starting in early summer is to rise at first light and see which of my lovelies have opened overnight. I greet them like old friends, exclaim at their beauty, then deadhead their spent compadres. Extraordinarily therapeutic, I could hardly bear the idea that this ritual was not going to be available to me in my long-awaited English garden.

And while hosta love the English climate, so do slugs and snails. They would decimate complete plants overnight. Eventually, I just gave up on another of my once-dependable garden companions.

The old adage "the grass is always greener on the other side" could not have been more apt!

So, on a bitterly cold January day when I found myself viewing what was to become my next home, the garden not at all apparent under the snow and ice, my heavy heart was lifted by a single thought: I can once again garden like a Minnesotan!

Mine was the sole offer despite a strong seller's market, the discounted asking price, and that the property sat directly across from Folwell Park. Observed from the right angle, you could believe the park was an extension of the garden. I found this irresistible. It was as if this place had been waiting just for me. Because I desperately needed somewhere to call my own. Because I could see beyond the achingly sad shabbiness of this 1925 bungalow. Because I am a gardener.

My new home was located in north Minneapolis. When I first moved to the Twin Cities, I learned to navigate this foreign land thusly: North was bad. *Always*. South was good. *Always*. West was affluent suburbia where I could ride horses. East was the direction of travel required to get to our twin, St. Paul.

I bucked the system early and moved into neighborhoods that alarmed everyone within my newly-acquired social circle. I made money every time I sold a house. Gentrification was my friend. You will hear gunshots every night said a young cop I consulted prior to making my latest home-buying decision. I went ahead with the purchase anyway; gunfire was no match for my track record.

He was right. Calling 911 has become integral to my lifestyle. In the beginning, I called often out of sheer disbelief at the crimes and various wrongs unfolding in front of my white privileged eyes. Now, I am more likely to call out of anger and outrage. I have developed a set of 911-worthy standards. If drug dealers are selling to adults, moving on quickly, I am inclined to give them a pass. But the guy terrifyingly tearing down the street on the illegal 4-wheeler turns me into a crazy woman, and on principle I pick up my phone.

I confess that, sometimes, I have left it to others to react when gunshots stutter out in the middle of the night. I worry that I will fall prey to the complacency and cynicism that infects many of my neighbors. Fear and distrust of local law enforcement is deeply rooted here on the Northside. I am almost relieved when another event triggers the now-familiar heady cocktail of fear, fury, and desire to right a wrong and I reach for that phone.

It was a wimpy winter by Minnesota standards. The snow was gone by March and the thaw revealed the true extent of the neglect that I had inherited. Like the Sear's kit house, it was clear I was going to have to engage in a little digging and destruction to rejuvenate Mary's little house. Yards and yards of odd little retaining walls, now tipping over in all directions, had to be removed. As did the business end of an ancient washing line that was serving as a bird feeder rack. A non-functioning Narnia light was randomly placed where I could envision a flower bed.

Then I waited.

Spring stampedes into Minnesota—a wonder to behold if you have lived through one of these winters. Even after gardening here for over two decades, I am amazed that anything survives the depth of the deep freeze. Yet once all danger of snow has passed, in a matter of weeks everything is covered in a haze of green. You become adept at identifying plants (and weeds) from the barest tuft of growth, the blessed relief and thrill when your beloved bits and pieces show signs of life.

But even as you are welcoming the return of your garden, Mother Nature is whispering in your ear ... *Hurry, hurry! Waste not a minute. Come November, the snow will fly.* All you hope to achieve must be accomplished in Minnesota's short-lived growing season. Gardening in the Upper Midwest is an intense experience. For me, a powerful driving force.

That first spring, I confess I was especially excited as I waited to see Mary's garden. Mary was a gardener. Everyone told me so. In the meantime, I found some of her treasures scattered throughout the beds, stored in the garage and basement, many of them not to my taste. In the past, I would have rehoused these items. Yet now I did not. A pink Dollar Store kneeler has proved to be invaluable. A cracked garbage can is perfect for weeding as it tips neatly inside the requisite paper lawn bags. And buried

deep under layers of decaying leaves I came across a stepping stone, orange and black koi swimming around its edges. It lives next to a newly-dug pond, much safer than the real thing who would almost certainly become midnight snacks for marauding raccoons.

This was the start of a fresh approach to making a garden. There were budgeting constraints. What could I recycle, re-purpose? To re-use Mary's leftovers in unexpected ways seemed both practical and respectful. It gave me permission to be more relaxed as I set about building something livable and lovely. My world had been turned upside down, the perfect time to break through those self-imposed creative barriers.

By May, I had a better feel for the garden itself. Frankly, I was disappointed.

There was much evidence that no-one had been picking up the litter that is endemic to the north side of Minneapolis. The primary bed was not full of whimsical plantings as the jaunty brick edging might suggest. Just some very ordinary hosta and phlox, a wire Easter egg basket thrown in for good measure. And a carpet of weeds and saplings from the street maples. The allium, though plentiful and most welcome in the spring, were jammed up against the back wall, their early-season impact lost in the shadow of the building. The "nice hedge" (so described by the uninspired Realtor selling the house) was pruned to within an inch of its life. In contrast, the one mature tree, a messy ash, was gasping for a trim, more dead than alive.

In front, a lonely hydrangea was parked in full sun on the edge of the inexplicably lumpy lawn, where it would attract the attention of local dogs and be bumped and bruised by pedestrians rounding the corner. I didn't understand how it could still be alive given its harsh positioning.

I tend to focus my attention on my more private back yard. But it was here, at the intersection of two less-than-desirable streets in North Minneapolis, that I unearthed where Mary had created her *pièce de résistance*. A single bed. A bed that would accumulate snow, salt and sand delivered by the City plows. That would suffer the most from accidental foot traffic. That would collect the worst of Folwell's trash. That would from time to time be driven over by cars under the influence of their reckless or impaired owners.

Nothing made sense. I could see the love that Mary had put into this one bed, but I struggled at first to comprehend why she might have selected this particular space for

what appeared to be her primary gardening effort. Where was the work of the great gardener?

But then I reminded myself that Mary was sick. Perhaps she was too tired to tend to more than this small plot. Could this also have been a mark of defiance on her part? To demonstrate that you can create and sustain beauty anywhere? Even at a crossroad that far too often bears witness to human drama and chaos. Frequently loud. Occasionally violent.

Did she choose to cultivate here because, near the end, it took her out into the world and provided an opportunity to greet her neighbors? Have a natter. Observe the action on the street, good and bad. And hear how passersby appreciated her endeavors. "*I love your flowers!*" A beep of the horn, a smile and thumbs up from a total stranger. Because, I've learned, this is what happens when you are tending Mary's garden.

I have come to view this garden as a miracle of sorts. It has yielded many beautiful surprises and helped me become deeply connected with this sometime challenging neighborhood. Has sustained me through another difficult adjustment as an expat. It is our curse to forever be leaving precious people. This part never gets any easier. My gardens have always eased the pain. Have enabled me to create a sense of place when I was starting again.

It has been while tending Mary's flower bed that I have experienced the most uplifting of encounters. The most humbling, like the freely-given hugs from the little girls that catch the bus on my corner or the young boy who has blessed me with his inquisitive friendship, somehow rising above the mayhem of his cramped and noisy household where a man was shot and killed shortly before I arrived. For months, I naively assumed the deflated balloons hanging sadly from the tree on the curb were left over from a kid's birthday celebration. Another neighbor unexpectedly pulled up his shirt to show me the tattooed landscape of his back: tigers, eagles, and flowers. Another nature lover. Our mutual love of the natural world couldn't stop the jolt I felt when I spied the .44 Magnum tucked into his waist band. I marvel at the way a flower or visiting butterfly ensnares complete strangers in conversation about the wonders of our planet.

Something that seems unique to Northside living is how on the bleakest of days, when life on this street seems unutterably hard, someone will express gratitude for the beauty of my garden, and instantly the world is put to rights.

There is much need in this community, and I have been graced with many random opportunities to give to others. I have developed a reputation. I have scoured the ground for spent shells outside my window in the wake of gun-wielding truant teenagers fleeing from an unidentified assailant. I bullied the City into installing a four-way stop sign at my corner and shamed the Park Board into giving our neglected park the love it had so long deserved. This place has provided me with a job when I thought I had none.

I had been absolutely determined to transplant the poorly-placed hydrangea that first year, quite prepared to take the risk that it wouldn't live through such a move. But thankfully I ran out of time and energy. Because it is a stunner. Starting to bloom in June, it goes on and on, the blossoms spectacular and deliciously fragrant.

The hardy hydrangea is not alone in thriving where it should not. Hosta have been treated likewise, planted in full sun in thin soil, and in their resilience, they have spread through chinks in the brick edging, lending a delightfully haphazard effect to the planting.

I have never had a garden that attracts so many birds. The garden grows, seemingly, unbidden. Even the hosta self-seed. The allium planted under the overhangs of the roof get virtually no moisture. Yet when I dig them up, they reappear. A mystery rose has popped up in the same barren spot. Diminutive balloon flowers appear hither and thither in a stone-dry bed where I was sure nothing could flourish. It was here also that I found what I at first believed to be some sickly daylilies of the '*Stella de Oro*' variety. I am not a fan of the color or the ever-blooming concept and dumped them unceremoniously in Mary's boulevard. This daylily is in fact a gorgeous creamy yellow. And tiny. Like the balloon flowers. Another near miss!

Mary's planting decisions seemed to defy gardening logic. There can be no other explanation: these plants bloom for Mary.

I have of course put my own stamp on the most recent of my northern gardens. I have planted many trees, some donated by public schemes seeking to reforest North Minneapolis following the devastation of the 2011 tornado. I have switched things up and further developed Mary's riotous color scheme, just as I have made use of many of Mary's curiosities.

I gladly accept donations from friends and neighbors with which to fill my growing garden and am thankful for these living gifts. This is a marked departure from my former strict gardening self that would have turned down the likes of the previously-scorned *Stella de Oro* and the near-neon orange liliium, beautifully brash, that now brighten Mary's bed. These were a contribution from the .44 Magnum owner. These plants are tough, easy keepers, perfect for that dangerous boulevard.

As I dig and change, I have uncovered 20th century trash: Broken bottles, china shards, hardware, a tiny Cinderella slipper. I cherish this glimpse into the generations that called this corner home before my time. Before Mary's time. I save the best pieces and wonder about their owners. And when the day comes that I must leave here, they will accompany me on my travels. In memoriam.

I continue to hear that Mary was quite the gardener. She was very kind, generous, trusting. Maybe too trusting it has been suggested. Sometimes Mary was a little, well, eccentric: compulsively mowing the lumpy lawn, trimming that hedge. I am always grateful for these insights into the woman whose passing made my Northside life possible. And very often those who knew her ask the question: where is Mary now? I have to explain that Mary is gone. This has been an altogether unexpected responsibility. I observe their faces, see the shock and sadness, the little expressions of discomfort that they should have known. Mary was their neighbor.

How can this happen? Because this is Minnesota. The first frost drives us into a frenzy of preparation for the long cold months ahead. Then we hunker down for the winter. Children are conceived. People marry. Move away. Get sick. And die. In the spring, we venture outside and catch up. Quickly. For in just a few short months, the snow will fly.

Afterword

I have recently looked up Mary's obituary. I had resisted taking this step for fear that I would learn something that wouldn't mesh with how I understood her. Instead, I discovered a deeper connection. Mary was the sister of a man that I had worked alongside for a number of years. My former co-workers had attended Mary's funeral.

Importantly, I learned that my sense of Mary was not misplaced. She was a volunteer teacher's assistant, loved children, was passionate about the arts. She was pretty.

I have come to feel an affinity and an affection for Mary. There is much we have shared beyond the plants that survived her. Ours is a story of two gardeners. And their Northside garden.

"There is something magical in sophisticating the elements into something livable, something human. It is as if you are building your own heart."

—Harry Jensen, December 2018



Carolyn Bastick, British by birth and a naturalized American, was born in Hong Kong into a British Army generational family, survived the eccentricities and lack-luster education provided by the English boarding school system (a memoir she fully intends to write one day), and spent much of her adult life as an expat living in the States, raising a family, and working in the compliance world. She is a lapsed horsewoman and passionate self-taught gardener and has recently re-repatriated to England, where she is happily self-isolating with her fiancé in their large and unruly garden—finally learning how to be an English gardener.