

MY GARDEN OF CREATIVE INSPIRATION

Susan Blacklin



For most of my life I pretty much raised my four children as a single parent. I never had time for myself. I never had time to think about what or who I wanted to be when I grew up. Finally, my time arrived; I could grow up, embark on and seize the opportunity to get to know myself, to nurture and develop all that I aspired to be. I had just turned 60 and was about to begin my new life.

It was no easy feat leaving Saskatchewan to drive across the Rockies in the middle of winter to establish a new home on Vancouver Island, not knowing anyone. Slowly I made friends. I joined aquacise classes, signed up for various art and creative writing classes, and I volunteered my therapy dogs at care homes. I had dreamed of retirement being a time to paint, draw and garden, to knit, to hike with my dogs, to read as many books as possible and to write my memoirs. Now my dreams were becoming reality. And fate introduced me to a wonderful man who would become my new partner and soul mate. Two years later we set up a new home where, for the first time in my life, I had an art studio. My partner and I shared a love of gardening, and soon set out to “paint” our garden landscape for ten-hour days.

Originally, we had designed a plan to renovate the back garden of our home. By the end of the first day, we discarded the layout prepared on paper and began working organically, by sight and feel, in the back corner and along the fence. As neither of us liked straight lines, we designed curves centred by

a large wrap-around patio poured with curved edges. As our design confidence grew, so did our garden, abandoning lawn for additional flower beds, building gravel paths for access and views. My partner, thinking a pond would be a great feature, dug one in the opposite corner to where our initial reno began.

With local garden clubs holding plant sales and nurseries having an abundance of beautiful selections, we went crazy. But my most treasured plants were those received from friends. Louise, a Master Gardener and member of one garden club, took me under her wing, gifting me with many plants: false solomon’s seal with its fabulous scent, euphorbia, bloodwort – which, in my

Front garden





Top: *Tulips*, watercolour

Above: *Birch Trees*, watercolour



opinion, is the most beautiful small spring blossom. Another friend, Janet, gave us beautiful perennial poppies. Others gave us annual poppy seeds that we scattered everywhere. Everything grew like magic – astilbe, aquilegias of many varieties, campanula, callicarpa, echinacea, hostas for the shade garden, hydrangeas and lupins, even orchids. Coming from Saskatchewan I had no idea how fast and prolific everything would grow here on Vancouver Island. My partner and I were elated with the results. It was a true collaboration, with neither of us holding back nor anchoring the other. After completing the backyard, we turned our attention to the front.

Continuing the meandering paths between flower beds, we filled them with plants gifted from others. The front garden, once a long sloping expanse of boring dead lawn, impossible and inappropriate – given climate change - to water sufficiently to keep green, was removed by my partner. We changed the gradual slope, built retainer walls and more flower beds along meandering paths. By year six we had added the “icing” to our garden – a yin-yang shaped patio. We had no idea that this sitting area would invite so many from the community to stop and chat. It was the sum of our combined creativity, a place for socializing and community making. Each year we hosted garden concerts with local musicians. With my art group, we enjoy painting “en plein air,” where I love painting my flowers.

After building the gardens, we began to garden in earnest, as many plants needed to be divided each spring and fall. I couldn't throw perfectly good perennials into the compost, so we began potting the plants to give away. Eventually, having to buy pots and potting soil, we charged a small fee to cover costs. As people came to buy plants, we invited them to stroll around our garden. In return, fellow gardeners invited us to visit theirs. And so, “Gardeners Anonymous” was born – a group who share a serious addiction to gardening. We soon discovered another magnet drawing us together: many of these avid gardeners are also passionate artists. From watercolours to oils, abstract to realism, gardens inspire us to paint our creative spirit. The only requirement to join Gardeners Anonymous is to open your garden to fellow members once each summer.

Having taken many art classes and experimented with a variety of media over the last decade – pen and ink, conté, graphite, watercolour and acrylics, come the cold winter days I paint pictures of various flowers in our garden. Our garden has truly become the centre of inspiration for all my creativity year round. Photography, reading, writing, music, painting and drawing, even knitting, in our garden brings me calmness, the ability to focus and inspiration in the form of meditation and therapy. Sitting in our garden to write my first memoir and do the required hours of editing was empowering, giving me a confidence transferred to my art.

In 2022 it will be nine years since we began our garden renovations. Today we have over 3000 bulbs announcing spring's arrival, and more than 700 perennial plants, all of which are labelled. We give away or sell over 1000 one-gallon pots of plants each spring to neighbours and fellow gardeners. I



Top: *Hummingbirds*, ink
Above: *Vase of pansies*, acrylic

like to think I am living up to my Nana's saying, "The front garden is to feed the souls of people passing by," and to my own belief that gardens are for sharing. We also share our garden with an abundance of birds, especially hummingbirds, who drink nectar from each colourful flower they find.

When we are playing in our garden people frequently stop to tell us how they intentionally cycle or walk past our garden each week to see what is in bloom. Inspired, my partner built a bench for folks to sit and admire our front garden beside the community library box he also built for locals to exchange their favourite books. Last year, I made garden signs saying "Imagine" and "This too will pass," never thinking then that we would still be waiting for it to pass today.

When Covid hit us all two years ago, the gardens became our sanctuary, motivating me to paint and draw, rejuvenating us both. We kept our fingers in the soil, watched the garden transform as new buds emerged, often with special memories of those dear to us who had given us that plant. I received pleasure cutting and arranging fresh flowers into the bouquets I delivered to friends and neighbours.

As a tutor of two ESL students, I am overjoyed when they take their chairs and sit deep in a flower bed, absorbing its scents and colours, being inspired to enjoy reading their favourite books. These students love to paint with me in my art studio, and in the summer months they become budding artists, painting rocks, which they sell to raise funds for their college tuitions. With my own grandchildren living so far away, it gives me great joy to nurture children who had only known a refugee camp until five years ago. I love that our garden invites them to be creative, too.

My new life has become everything and more than I ever dreamed. To get out of bed each morning and do whatever my heart desires is a blessing. Each day I pinch myself that life can be so great. To be surrounded, inside and outside, by my creative expressions, and those of my partner, continues to enliven and inspire us.

Susan Blacklin grew up in London, England, and emigrated to Canada in 1970. She spent the next forty years dedicated to raising her four children, often in challenging situations as a single parent. Upon retirement, Susan's life took a completely new path, one where she could aspire to many of her lifelong dreams and goals. Now living in Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island with her partner, they share a love of gardening with their local community. Little did she know that the roots they would plant to establish their English garden would provide the foundation for her creative spirit to evolve and prosper – even during Covid. She is excited to have their garden on the local Mother's Day Garden Tour in 2022 (all being well with Covid), where her community's artists will be invited to paint. Susan can be reached at susan.blacklin@yahoo.com

Susan extends the sharing of her garden by including a video for your enjoyment: Either go to YouTube, Susan Blacklin, videos or follow this link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIXJwBIUuCG>