

GARDENS THAT BLOOM WRITERS

“You must see my Naked Lady,” my 90 year-old friend Elisabeth says, eyes shining as she greets me. Excitedly, she leads me down the slope of her backyard. Elisabeth spreads her hands as though she is letting go a small bird to show me a tall plant with large pink flowers, sweetly fragrant.

My friend is a wonderful poet, and as I start to think about it, I realize a common thread links my writer friends—they love to garden.

When Lillian, a short story writer, is blocked, she switches off her word processor and goes happily to dig in the rich earth until the images and words flow again. “When you can’t think of an adverb, pull a weed,” Lillian says.

Lillian grows ranunculuses, camellias, azaleas and roses, and says of them, “Whatever is at its most glorious is the plant I like the best. I’m easily enticed.” A gourmet cook as well as a gardener/writer, Lillian is now carefully planting an herb garden: thyme, rosemary, opal and sweet basil.

Janie, a tall blonde with a South Georgia drawl, a novelist, has a profusion of roses running along the fence in front of her house. “This is my Country Western section,” she says, proudly showing the roses off: Dolly Parton, a multi-color pink, and Patsy Cline, a yellow Floribunda. Then we move out of Nashville on to the red John F. Kennedy and the blood red Christian Dior, and finally to Janie’s favorite, Circus Parade, a multi-colored orange.

After the front yard, we go to the back where a larger garden grows. Janie radiates pleasure as she leads visitors on a tour of her plantings: an Australian Tree Fern with white and black bark, a Hankow Twisted Willow, and the apricot, almond, avocado, and miniature peach trees she has set out with many other bushes and flowers to create a small woods near the California coast.

Author/artist Gertrud Mueller Nelson describes her garden as “a great hodge podge.” Her hollyhocks riot down the hill and roses grow next to rhubarb. Poppies and daisies thrive amid peach and plum trees. “I feel connection to the earth is important even if all you have is a window box,” Gertrud says. “Planting seeds and growing and ripening and dying is a cycle that parallels our human cycle. The more we get off from the earthly process the more our culture loses its richness.”

A connection to the earth nurtures these women and inspires them. Gardening is their passion and relaxation and puts them in touch with the concrete and sensual elements of life from which the best writing comes. When another novelist friend of mine gets on the phone with her long distance lover, they do not whisper sweet nothings. Instead, they talk about the plants they have just repotted.

The “growing” world and writing have always been connected. The English Romantic poets were nature writers, most notably William Wordsworth. Today with technology and urban life increasingly separating us from the natural world, nature has become an important theme for writers like Wendell Berry, Rich Bass and Gary Snyder.

I don’t think it’s accidental that my writing connected me to a garden. The place where I loved to write was at Esmeralda, a coffee house/bookstore that overlooked the Pacific Ocean. Esmeralda’s garden was filled with large terra cotta pots containing a profusion of different flowers whose changes heralded the almost non-existent seasons in Southern California. The garden was at times a jungle of four foot high Canna Lilies blossoming in large red, golden, and brilliant orange flowers intermixed with smaller purple and white Cosmos and Miriam. On three sides of the garden were hills with cascading green ground cover dotted by palm trees, Italian Cypress and Birds of Paradise. Today, the bookstore has closed, but the garden remains.

As my friends’ experiences prove, tending the earth can nurture the creative writing process. So, I’ve decided that the next time I need inspiration, I’ll just pick up a trowel and start digging.

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