

Tending where faith also flowers



IRENE VIRAG

On a night a few years ago when the full moon filled a desert in Israel and for a moment the world seemed at peace, Ed Dugger traveled into the soul of his own garden.

Ed's journey took place during a pilgrimage to the Baha'i Center in Haifa, where greenery and tranquillity bloom in a country besieged by strife. "One night we were in the garden praying and meditating," he says, "and I looked up and realized the security guard had locked the gate. There was a full moon, the garden was serene and very spiritual. I attribute my own garden to that place and that experience."

Ed's garden grows in New Cassel, which he described in a letter inviting me to his home as "a neighborhood beset with litter, graffiti and gang violence." He is a Baha'i, and his faith teaches that the essence of all religions is one. It is that way with Ed's eighth of an acre. It is a garden of many rooms. And all of them make sense as one garden.

We stand in one of the rooms — a lily garden in a corner of the front yard. "In Haifa," Ed tells me, "everything was green and beautiful — like nothing I'd ever seen before. I was praying for this neighborhood, and it occurred to me, if Haifa could bloom in the desert, maybe my community could, too."

The lilies soften the summer heat. Pink, white, cream and yellow, they are offset by ferns and Japanese anemones and hostas and hollyhocks. "I don't like hosta flowers," Ed says, "but I like the architectural form of the plant. I cut back the flowers so your eye goes to the maroon hollyhocks."

I notice orange lilies popping up among the whites. "I was never a fan of orange," Ed explains. "But in Haifa you see beautiful orange colors in the garden. And Gertrude Jekyll says if you combine it with blues and whites, it works."

That's another thing about Ed's garden. It also blooms with many influences and life experiences. He draws from garden legends Gertrude Jekyll and Vita Sackville-West. From his father who died three years ago. And even from his job as director of college counseling at Friends Academy in Locust Valley. "I grow squash from Brazil, because every year I take a group of students from Friends to Brazil, where we work with an organization that



uses gardening to teach street kids about private space and other life lessons. I grow olives as a tribute to Israel; they spend the winter in the garage."

We stroll around the side of the house, where red roses bloom against a gold-painted trellis and freestanding posts. In reading about the Edwardian era in England, Ed came across the phrase "one golden afternoon." So why not a golden room? he thought. In the light of the setting sun, the trellis sparkles and the roses turn fiery orange and the garden seems ablaze.

A few steps farther, we are in a long narrow woodland border. Conifers show off in shades of green, a silver king euonymus brightens a dark area, and the mottled green and silver foliage of lamium spills out of a pot. Moss and ferns live on the stump of a chokeberry bush that died a

few years ago. For Ed, they represent the interconnectedness of things.

Ed also nurtures memories. In a corner of the backyard, he



A sign of "Peace" marks the gate post in a part of the garden scented by lilies.



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / BILL DAVIS

Ed Dugger, left, in his New Cassel garden. Blue hydrangeas snuggle up to potted lavender, above, and pink roses get a little support from weathered statuary, below.



planted a vegetable potager as a memorial to his father, James. His parents came to New Cassel in the 1960s, and his father, who grew up on a farm in Virginia, planted vegetables in rows. "Collards, tomatoes, squash. He was utilitarian and practical — if he couldn't eat it, he didn't grow it. When he died, I thought what do I do with this earth he tended for so long? I'd never grown vegetables. Then I got an idea — to combine what he did and what I do in the same space."

Ed read about George Washington's garden at Mount Vernon — so he planted a boxwood border around the potager. He added herbs, soybeans and nasturtiums, and espaliered apple, pear and peach trees along a trellis. "I don't know what my father would make of all this, but I think he would be impressed with my yield. My tomato yield is higher — not collards though."

Finally, we come to his white garden — inspired by Vita Sackville-West's famous white border. It includes a lovely Japanese anemone and white phlox and Casa Blanca lilies and a Liberty elm. Every summer, Ed holds a Baha'i feast in the white garden. Lights and candles twinkle, and the garden glows.

The tour ends. Ed stands on his driveway and views his verdant plot of earth. He reads a Baha'i verse written on his garage that begins: "Flowers may be varied in their colors but all are flowers of one garden."

And he thinks about his community. "I see my garden as a way to make a statement," he says. "Maybe this is the desert. Maybe this garden is the oasis that can inspire someone else to plant a flower, to take care of another living thing."

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