

# Inspired by a master of miniatures

**L**ike life, the garden path is a winding road. You never know what's around the corner — the unexpected, the serendipitous, the bittersweet, even the sorrowful. Like life, the garden path has its bumps.

The journey, I've learned in the 14 years I've meandered through my garden and many of yours, is what matters.

And so I thought I'd tell you about an old friend — gone but not forgotten, and now rediscovered across the continent from the Cape Cod-style house in Malverne where we first met.

Where a 74-year-old retired mail carrier shared his stretch of the garden path with a young writer assigned to a beat she'd never imagined covering.

It was my first season as a garden columnist. I had spent more than a decade on the news side of the paper specializing in stories of death and despair. Suddenly, I was writing about people who got their hands dirty — and loved it. And almost everyone I met kept telling me the same thing: "You have to see Ed Rezek's place." And since I believed then — as I still do — that the best garden writing is about people as well as plants, I decided to check out this man who was so admired by so many gardeners.

Ed was a lucky guy. Not only because of his wife, Maureen, the girl he met at a barn dance in their native Queens and fell in love with right away, or their life in the cape and their three children and six grandchildren. Although he didn't need fame, he found it in the chosen fields around his home. He made a dream come true.

The seeds of his dream were planted in his soul many years ago in China when he was a young Marine staff sergeant who had come through the battle of Okinawa with his life still ahead of him. While exploring the ancient city of Peking, which we now know as Beijing, he found himself in the royal enclave — the Forbidden City whose gates had just been lifted for outsiders.

For the soldier fresh from the hellfire of war, the beauty and serenity of the Forbidden City were elixirs. He was fascinated by miniature

plants he had never seen before growing in artful arrangements and unusual shapes and sizes. And he carried their images home with him. Most of us have such memories — often wisps of recollection that we seek to retreat to when the world goes crazy.

"I carried a picture of the Forbidden City in my mind," Ed told me years later when I visited him and Maureen and wondered for a magic moment if I was in another continent. Actually, I was a traveler in Ed's dream. He had mastered the ancient art of miniature landscaping that may even have predated bonsai.

Not all the plants in Ed's garden were small, especially a weeping blue Atlas cedar that grew from a single trunk and was trained to wind around the house like a fringed curtain. But he nurtured a white pine the size of his fist that was almost 10 years old. A 3-foot-tall false cypress spanned a century.

"*Chamaecyparis pisifera Compressa*," Ed said — he'd perfected botanical Latin along with grafting and propagation, and his Queens accent gave it a special flavor. "It's not nice to fool Mother Nature," he liked to say. "But I do it all the time."

In all, more than 1,000 dwarf and slow-growing evergreens — from yellow-green to near blue — luxuriated in the ground, and another 1,500 looked happy in containers. By then, the sturdy gardener with a wide and instant smile had earned an international reputation as a master grafter and an expert collector of miniature conifers. Along with other giants in the world of dwarf plants — such as fellow Long Islanders Joe Reis and Joel Spingarn and the late Jean Iseli, a bashful mathematician who had bought a little nursery in Oregon — Ed helped found the American Conifer Society.

I ran into Ed on and off over the following years, but as is



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Ed Rezek, who died three years ago today, in the dwarf conifer garden of his Malverne home

often the case, I realize now that I didn't see him enough. He died on Dec. 21, 2005. He was 81. It was three years ago today. Talk about coincidences.

You see, there's a postscript. This past September, I was in Portland, Ore., at the annual convention of the Garden Writers Association. We toured the internationally famous Iseli Nursery in the shadow of Mount Hood — the place that Ed Rezek's old friend, Jean Iseli, had established years before.

I found myself in a Lilliputian world of miniature mugo pines and pint-size hemlocks and tiny cedars and false cypresses and firs. "They're like Ed Rezek's plants," my husband said.

As it turned out, some of them were. I stood in the garden of small wonders — of *Juniperus communis Compressa* that resembled a silver-green candle and *Chamaecyparis pisifera Cumulus* that looked like a fluffy green cloud, and the golden cascades of a horizontal juniper called Mother Load. And I was lost for a moment in memories of Ed and the

dream he grew in the earth.

I stopped one of the guides. His name was John Mohr, and he turned out to be Iseli's Long Island representative. I mentioned the name "Ed Rezek," and he stopped in his tracks. "Eddie. He was like a rock star." And John took me on a mini-tour of the display gardens to show me "Eddie's plants" — like *Pinus densifolia* Little Christopher, named after one of Ed's grandsons, and the *Chamaecyparis obtusa* that he called Little Doll for Maureen.

Then, John introduced me to Paul Halladin, Iseli's chief propagator. "He was my mentor and my inspiration," Paul said. "I was just a kid when I met him, a worker in the greenhouse. I was in awe. Over the years, he shared a lot of plants with us. He came out here a lot, and we even went to Holland to look for conifers. Jean Iseli, Ed Rezek — these guys were my dads."

Ed Rezek was one of my inspirations, too. I visited Maureen recently, and I was touched when she showed me the note I'd sent Ed after his first stroke. He'd tucked it into a photo album of the garden

that was by his side in the hospital. We walked in the garden that she continues to tend for the man she kissed at a barn dance and shared her life with for almost 59 years. She's even learned how to graft. Some of Ed's ashes are buried in the Long Island National Cemetery in Pinelawn, and some are buried in his garden. A stone marker in the village green commemorates "Edward Rezek — Malverne's Master Gardener."

"Iseli sent a *Chamaecyparis obtusa* Baldwin Variegated, and we planted it where his ashes are buried," Maureen said. "I can still say what I always said: 'Eddie's in the garden.'"

And in her heart. And in the hearts of gardeners like me who nurture the earth and dreams, too.

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