

THE GARDEN SPEAKS OF TOMORROW

By Irene Virag

A DEEP RED HIBISCUS as big as a dinner plate greeted me in the garden that graces my front yard. It was as if the hibiscus showed up overnight – I hadn't noticed it growing because it was tucked between the giant sunflowers and the hollyhocks and cleome and cosmos and asters.

The big hibiscus flowering on that late summer morning was a little miracle, but that didn't surprise me. Miracles happen every day in the Garden of Health and Joy. That's what my husband and I call the 40-by-40-foot vegetable and flower garden that was only a dream until this spring. My joy was immediate when the garden materialized and, if there's power in the good earth, maybe my happiness among the blooms and bounty will lead me to health. Maybe it will be an omen of victory over the wild seed called breast cancer that has invaded my life.

"It's beautiful," my neighbor, Jeanette Stellmann, said the other day as she looked at the fuchsia flowers of the gomphrena and the red and green leaves of the Swiss chard – a vegetable my husband hated as a little boy but couldn't get enough of this summer. "You could charge admission."

We wouldn't, of course, even though we could use the money – we've practically planted our paychecks in the garden. But it was praise of the highest order. Jeanette is by far the horticultural laureate of our neighborhood. Why did we need such a big lawn? she'd asked a couple of years ago. "You could grow corn."

As usual, Jeanette was right. When we moved into our house five years ago, we never envisioned anything but grass in the front yard. The only time we used our front lawn was during an annual summer bash called "the relative party" when the younger cousins played croquet on the green. Besides, it is the only part of our property in full sun – the light is absolutely drenching. But we grow with our gardens – over the years our horizons broadened. Suddenly, the front yard seemed made for more than grass.

My husband and I never promised each other a cornfield, but we did want to expand our vegetable garden, then a modest patch in the backyard. This spring, we decided to move it to the front lawn. Maybe we'd even surround it with a fence and a few flowers. Nothing grandiose.

But when landscape designer Conni Cross - who helped us figure out where to move our overgrown foundation plantings last spring – came up with something more ambitious, we saw the possibilities right away. She called it our Garden of Health and Joy. In a year when I'm dealing with breast cancer, the name itself seemed like a prayer.

As a late March afternoon faded into dusk, we staked out a 40-by-40-foot square and the Garden of Health and Joy was born. The plot was dug up in April, the Belgian block that defined the beds was laid in May, and the garden was composted and rototilled in June. "You have great soil," Conni told us. "I'd kill for your soil. You're going to have some garden." We beamed. We were very proud of our dirt.

Pride, as you know, often goeth before a fall. By July, we began to worry whether our front-yard Eden would materialize before autumn. Conni's suggestion called for a classic design - an herb wheel in the center, four vegetable beds around it, a border of flowers for cutting, a 4-foot-high picket fence with vines growing along it and an outer border of roses and lilies and baby's breath and salvia.

The big holdup had little to do with soil, seedlings or reconfiguring the sprinkler system we'd installed in the lawn the year before. Let's just say that the fence was our big hurdle. But we took things in stride and even adjusted to the fact that the color didn't quite match the shutters on our house as we'd expected – after all, it's not easy being green.

It wasn't until early July that the garden was planted. The vegetables went in first. The tomatoes included lusty nursery-grown plants and a couple of puny seedlings my husband had started indoors and somehow kept alive in pots outside, fussing over them as if they were babies. And then came red and green-leaf lettuce, eggplant and the Swiss chard.

The grand design was coming to life and even though the flowers had not yet entered the picture, we sat on our new teak benches in the garden the next morning and sipped tea. I took it as a good sign. That afternoon I had my last chemotherapy treatment.

Then the flowers arrived. A truckload of perennials and annuals. Cosmos and cleome and clematis. Oriental lilies and asters and ageratum. Roses and rudbeckia and phlox and peonies and salvia and snapdragons and lots more. When everything was finally planted, we walked along the mulch paths – the pine bark looks lovely – and held hands and cried. Who needed a cornfield on the front lawn? We felt as if we had Versailles.

And there was an added touch. My stepchildren bought their father a cedar obelisk for his birthday and we placed it in the middle of the herb wheel – in the very center of the Garden of Health and Joy. Sweet peas and passionflowers grow up the tower and an irrigation pipe runs through it. Twice a week, the spray head rises out of the obelisk automatically and waters the whole garden. Sometimes, we turn it on manually to entertain guests or to simply amaze ourselves.

Summer is ending now but the garden continues to amaze us. Morning glories garland the benches and roses embrace the arbors at the two entrances. Dahlias grow near the gates. Sunflowers peek from the corners and asters and cosmos mingle in a glorious profusion. Mandevilla and clematis climb up the picket fence and the garden is in constant motion with the comings and goings of bees and butterflies. Yellow finches visit and sometimes we even see a hummingbird.

How has our garden grown? By leaps and bounds and bounties. The morning sun reminds us of the light of southern France on a September day six years ago when my husband proposed and I said "uh-huh" and our lives rooted together and blossomed through days of rain and days of roses. We never thought we'd have anything like the Garden of Health and Joy.

Full sun and water and rich soil have conspired to create little miracles. Even the puny tomato plants prospered. It took us hours to stake and trim back the vines before they turned into a jungle. They leaped across the path and threatened to climb the cleome and strangle the sunflowers. I expect to be canning for weeks. I dead-head the basil daily and I can't use the dill and sage and parsley fast enough. The eggplants are purple majesties and the Swiss chard never stops.

Some of our front lawn remains but it is little more than a border for the garden that thrives in its center and that grows close to the center of our lives. In a summer that is not without sadness, the garden stands for tomorrow – for crops to come and flowers to bloom. It is my own garden of hope. My Garden of Health and Joy.