

Never a Yard, Always a Garden
By Jill E. Vercelli

“In England”, she austerely corrects the caller, “even the smallest plot of land is a garden, but never a yard. Scotland Yard is the only yard I know of and I certainly wouldn’t go there for a picnic.”

And this is how I, along with thousands of other listeners, am introduced, if not intrigued by The English Lady, a professional multifaceted English landscape designer whose history reads like a cross between a Jane Austin Novel and a Jackie Collins book.

Most of us aspiring gardeners, unlike the self-proclaimed English Lady, toil the soil, plant, pull, and pluck until we’re black, blue, and blistered, yet we’ve still got some militant aphid eating its way through the very heart of what we have slaved over. Of course I’m talking about our gardens.

And while this isn’t the time of year typically known for its power of planting persuasions, it is the time of year to cultivate what we can be doing to make this Spring’s gardening experience a triumph of blooming gratitude. For inspiration and valued gardening tips, I seek out that mellifluous English accent that, one anticipated third Thursday per month, rallies my indignant green thumb out of bed into perusing the radio dial in search of my gardening guru, The English Lady, a.k.a. Maureen Haseley- Jones, whom I listen to religiously on WRCH 100.5 FM radio in Hartford from eight to nine a.m.

Last September I was able to put a face with that marvelous English accent when I met The English Lady at her home in the hope of learning more about this knowledgeable landscape designer.

When she greets me outside her home I quickly realize that like the horse whisperer she is the garden whisperer, evidenced by her magnificent gardens that sprawl graciously like practiced royalty around her cozy red farmhouse in Old Lyme, Connecticut.

Maureen, like her gardens, is gracious and inviting, flowing from plant to flower and teaching me what's as natural to her as sunlight is to daylilies. There in her garden of Summer delights she looks a lot like Mother Nature herself.

I learn over a cup of afternoon tea, of course, that Maureen, otherwise known as Mo by close friends and family, has been planting, pruning, and pulling from gardens since her first toddled steps some fifty plus ten even years ago in Shropshire, England.

Inspired and taught by a multitude of family members inspired and taught by their family members and you've got a lengthy lineage in landscape design and installation that dates back to the sixteen hundreds.

As gardeners to the Earl, Maureen's family worked on the first Gardens at Powys Castle in Wales. There are water gardens and terraced gardens dotting the English countryside designed and installed by great, great ancestors whose very genealogy spreads like determined Wisteria vines. Passed down to us today in the landscapes designed by this talented English Lady designer.

Not to be outdone by those who have gone before her or by her aunt's house, registered on the National Trust Garden Tour, is the design of The English Lady's hometown garden in Shrewsbury, England. In the picture perfect postcard she holds in her hand, (Maureen believes it is still sold to travelers,) is a remarkably colorful display of flowers, shrubbery, and greenery all poetically displayed for the strollers participation if not jealous enjoyment.

Then as rebellious as the weeds in the gardens Maureen so often pulled she left it all behind; the family heritage, the degrees from the prestigious Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew in England, the mounting accolades that assured her position as flag bearer in a prided heritage, if not privileged society, and took off for the friendly skies of TWA, joining them as a flight attendant; but only after a brief stint racing Formula Ones in Europe.

The years to follow were even fuller ones for Maureen. She married an American, had three children and dedicated herself to the domesticity that would be her calling for the next ten years. Maureen tilled the soil in her new homeland, just as she'd done across the pond, a continuation of her birthright now blooming its beauty in a backyard, "excuse me, garden," that inspired all her neighbors on Long Island.

But as if not to outdo herself, Maureen shares with me a time in the mid-nineteen fifties spent as an actress on the English stage understudying for famed Murder She Wrote actress Angela Lansbury. "I always loved the theatre, acting, and dance," she says as I sip a spot of Earl Grey Tea while her purring cat Tindy tidies herself on my lap. (She was auditioned for the Sadler's Wells Junior Corp de Ballet by the famous male dancer Robert Helpman.) "I spent many of my teen years and early twenties training for a career on the stage while at the same time cultivating my family heritage in landscape design."

What followed however wasn't to be on the stage but rather, in the same vein, a career with the Associated Redifusion Television company, today known as Thames Broadcasting. Maureen, whose air of royal assurance is tempered with just the right amount of eccentricity, tells me how she led an executive to believe she was a man just so she could get her foot in the door. Feet in, she worked on numerous televised projects including time as production assistant in Westminster Abbey for the live broadcast of Princess

Margaret's wedding to Anthony Armstrong-Jones and the Wimbledon Tennis Championships of 1958.

Maureen laughs in remembering her friendship with Britain's legendary comedian Benny Hill. "He wrote all his jokes on toilet paper you know." Then adds without the slightest hint of affectation "He got that job at the BBC because of me."

In the early eighties and another degree later, this one in communications from Queens College in New York, a stage of a different character beckoned when she landed a job as an intern on the CBS soap opera *The Guiding Light*. "It didn't take long for them to realize what a talent I was", she says in her delightfully cheeky British humor, "Within a month I was invited to join the production staff and was soon writing for the show." And why not, her own life story was the dramatic stuff that soaps were made of, drama that keeps millions tuned in each week.

However, Maureen says she was left uninspired by the politicking of a new corporate climate being bred into the once creative tenure of daytime television and so she left for a job with a new cable television network called Lifetime. Two years later she'd had enough of the corporate world and left it for a future she had yet to find.

Then after a destined visit one weekend to her friend's home in Lyme, Connecticut, she fell in love with the area and began to feel the familial calling of a past and a passion soon to re-ignite.

A year later Maureen moved to Old Lyme, Connecticut and began the landscape design and installation company appropriately named The English Lady, LLC. “I was happy to finally be doing what I was put on this earth to do.” Maureen says while looking out her window to the sprawling gardens, “Astonishing to think it only took thirty years and four thousand miles to come home to my roots. “The rest, she muses in affable ease, is history.”

Maureen Haseley-Jones is the founder of The English Lady, LLC, a full service landscape design and installation company located in Old Lyme, Connecticut. Her company has been designing and installing landscapes throughout the Northeast since 1992. Her book “In Your Garden with The English Lady” is due out soon. To contact her call 1-877-The-E-Lady or www.TheEnglishLady.com

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