

PHOTOGRAPHED BY CELIA PEARSON

a garden in time

Twenty-five years of gardening have taught Marianna Russell about growth, loss, and herself.

I am in my garden digging tradescantia. I am always in my garden digging tradescantia at this time of the year. In the early spring, when the shoots are young and tender, I somehow talk myself into believing I can win the battle against this plant of many talents.


Tradescantia blooms at the end of May, around the time of irises and peonies, and then continues to bloom sporadically throughout the summer. In the fall it gives a final burst, sometimes blooming straight into November. Its tiny flowers—in shades of blue and pink, lavender and white—open in the morning and close at night. Its narrow, sword-like leaves extend high above the buds before curving to the ground in graceful arches. Tradescantia grows anywhere. As the catalogs say, it's a charming and desirable plant.



Clematis "Ramona" climbs a twig trellis by the potting shed. *Opposite:* John Russell created an herb garden in the stone foundation of an old tool shed. To the right of the gravel path is the original oval bed where the author first planted the persistent tradescantia among the irises and peonies.

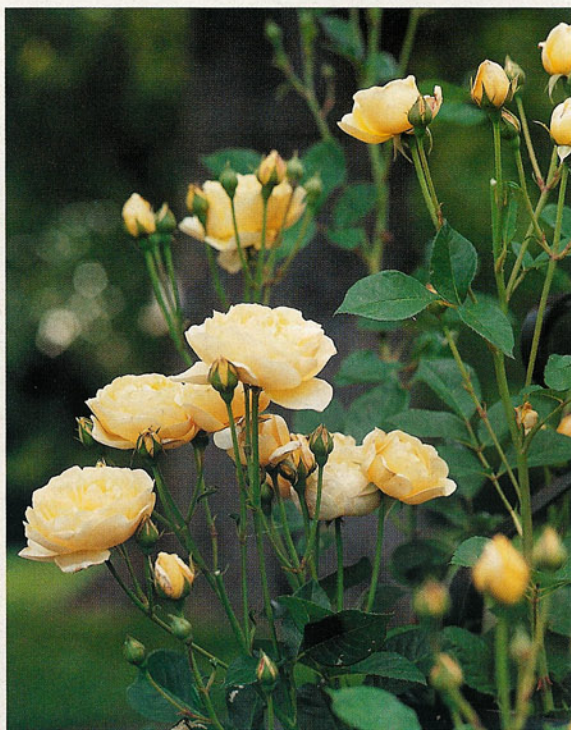




A lush garden scene featuring a stone path, a white picket fence, and various flowering plants including roses and daisies. The path is made of large, flat, grey stone slabs. To the left of the path, there are several plants, including white daisies and pink flowers. To the right, there are more daisies and a large bush of pink flowers. In the background, a white picket fence runs across the garden. Above the fence, there are climbing roses and other greenery. The overall scene is very green and vibrant, with a mix of colors and textures.

Low creeping plants (white cerastium, coral penstemon, silver lamb's ear and pink verbena) soften the bluestone path to the pool. Climbing roses cover the arched trellis, ready to bloom. *Right*, two weeks later, the "New Dawn" climber roses are blooming profusely above the gate.

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But in the 25 years I've been cultivating a garden, I've developed a complex relationship with tradescantia: It wants to expand uncontrollably, and I want to control it. Every spring, that conflict leads to the Tradescantia Wars. And this is how the wars begin: I'm crouching in the oldest of my flower beds, digging onion grass, tending to the first seasonal chores, when my trowel gets stuck in a solid clump of tradescantia roots. By the time I realize I've once again committed the grievous military error of underestimating the enemy, it's too late. I've launched a major battle.

The common name for tradescantia is spiderwort, and after intimate involvement with its root system I know the name is apt. When I shake the soil from the body of the plant, wobbly roots jiggle and slither like spider legs dancing on air. But their flexibility is deceptive: a hard chop from the edge of a trowel reveals an interior more like a raw carrot than a flimsy spider leg. Over and over I gouge the cold, damp earth, slicing away at slivered leaves, milky stems and matted roots, stopping only to claw and gather up the pieces.

When a whole clump breaks free at once, I hold it high at

Top: David Austin Old English Rose "Graham Thomas" grows up a pillar by the kitchen steps. **Above:** The author's husband, John Russell, built the potting shed, which is graced by climbing clematis "Ramona" and pink rose "Zepherine Drouhin."





Opposite: Yellow irises frame a view of the tranquil fish pond. At the far end, an apple tree spreads its branches over the fence.

This page, clockwise from upper left: Ancient irises already occupied an old oval bed near the farmhouse when the Russells moved in. "Dublin Bay" climbing rose thrives on a crisp white trellis. The view from the house shows the flagstone terrace encircling a waterfall and fish pond designed and installed by Scott Neal of Northbrook Landscape (410-357-4413). In spring, the ground cover in the foreground is punctuated with daffodils.



arm's length, a triumphant Perseus displaying Medusa's locks. Then my hands begin to bleed. I look up, scanning the battlefield where purple shoots seem to be springing up everywhere. I know I really should toss in the trowel and go inside to wash the blood from my hands. But I don't. I keep on digging.

I'LL PROBABLY NEVER RID MY GARDEN OF tradescantia. I wouldn't want to anyway, because it makes me think of Pat, a dear friend who died of cancer seven years ago. It was Pat who suggested I plant tradescantia—the only bad advice she ever gave me in the 20 years I knew her. As a teacher, she bestowed wise counsel naturally and inoffensively, ad-

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vising me on a variety of subjects: how to buy a run-down farmhouse in the country and fix it up without divorcing your spouse in the process; how to raise challenging children and less challenging cats; how to teach drama to children who don't want to be taught, and how to teach yourself to want to write; how to live well when you think you're not dying; and how to live better when you recognize you are.

Here I am, digging tradescantia, and the shell of memory suddenly cracks open to spill a vivid scene from long ago: a hot June morning, when, coffee mugs in hand, Pat and I left the coolness of her cozy blue and white kitchen to inspect her garden. Admiring the new bed beneath her kitchen window, I asked about the pretty little blue flowers. "Tradescantia," said Pat. "They're good for shade. You should plant some when you finally get around to fixing up your garden."

My husband and I had just moved into an old Victorian farmhouse that sat high and lonely on a hill among seven stately maples. The view from every window of the house could take your breath away, but half the windows were broken. There was a barn close by, and fields that sloped down to a valley below.

The two acres around the house were "landscaped" with crab apple trees by the swimming pool, a few flowering shrubs, and a row of daffodils planted along a ridge in the middle of the lawn. (We were puzzled by the daffodil row until we realized the ridge represented the old fence line. It must have run tight against the house in the days when a house and a hundred acres made a

family farm, and soil was turned for profit, not beauty.) The only other flowers were a clump of tall and lovely irises, planted by some previous owner and blooming in a weed-infested patch of ground near the house.

For a long time I had been dreaming of creating a garden. The day I saw Pat's, I knew it was time to start.

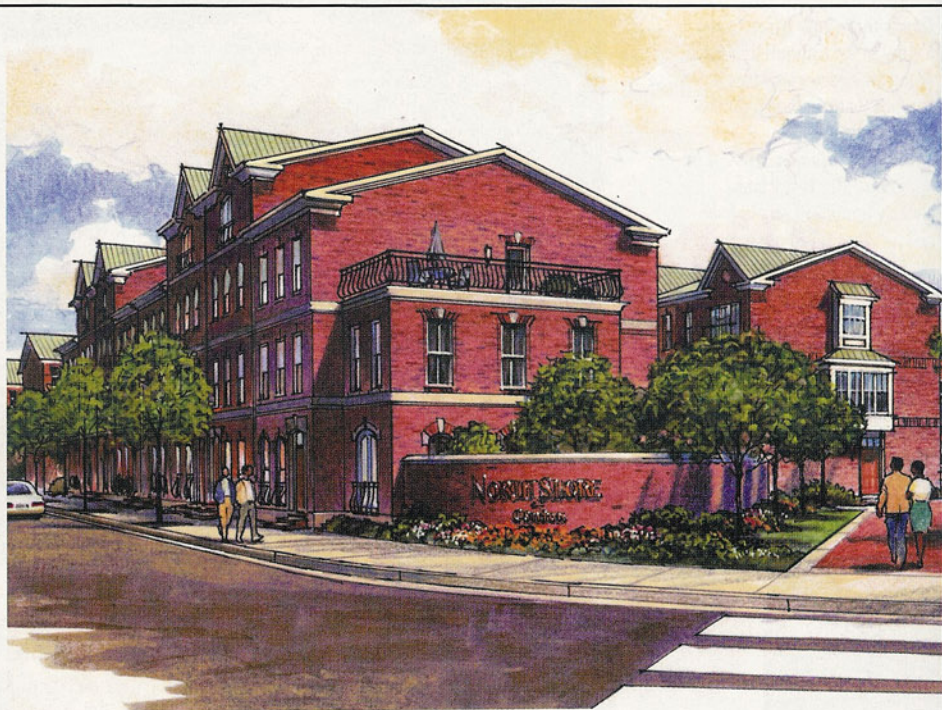
I could just discern the curving lines of a tired old oval-shaped bed surrounding the irises. This, I decided, would be my "spring" garden, featuring early bloomers to be enjoyed from the vantage point of the kitchen door. First I planted bulbs around the rhizomes of those ancient and hardy irises. Then I planted peonies on the sunny side of the bed—never to be moved, if I were to believe the standard garden lore.

Once the maple tree leafed out, I predicted, the rest of the garden would be in heavy shade. And under the predicted shade of the maple, I planted tradescantia. "Good for shade," Pat had said—and all those lavenders and blues would cool and color the garden in the heat of summer months. I hoped they'd spread so I wouldn't have to find other shade-loving plants. Now I know to be more careful what I wish for.

After tradescantia and peonies came daisies and day lilies, lamb's ears, yarrow, roses and rudbeckia. These went into beds around the pool, behind a picket fence where I could dig happily while remaining alert for the splash and chatter of small swimmers.

Once those swimmers got bigger, it seemed there was neither space nor time for serious gardening. Every patch of dirt got requisitioned, turned into a racetrack for Hot Wheels, or a playground for He-Men, Barbies and My Little Ponies. Every open space was claimed and designated: "the croquet lawn," "the softball field,"

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or “the closest place I can practice and still see when it gets dark.”

But somehow over the years, plants still came into my garden, for better or worse. All my daisies died. Ordered from an expensive nursery as a garden-warming gift from my mother, they failed to live up to their promise. (I told myself I wasn't ready for pushing up daisies.) The peonies, bought from the same expensive nursery, bloomed profusely, yet they too proved a disappointment. They all turned out to be the same shade of pale pink. And they drooped—cursed with that annoying habit plants have of leaning into the sun.

My prediction about the shade of the maple turned out to be wrong. After four or five years of watching it die, my husband and I decided to have it cut down. Suddenly that first bed became soaked in sun. The peonies and irises thrived. So did the tradescantia, despite its designation as a shade-loving plant. In fact, it did more than I ever asked of it, charging through dense purple-leaved ajuga, pushing up between rhizomes of venerable irises, burrowing under edging stones to stage an invasion of the lawn, popping up yards from where it was planted, and overgrowing its given boundaries.

As my garden ran rampant, my mind too began to outgrow boundaries. With my children half-grown, I threw myself into academic endeavors, unearthing a succession of passions. Though I still had little time for gardening, my garden began to crop up in my writing. Increasingly conscious of connections between growing plants, growing a person, and growing a writer, I wrote about our trees, about my peonies, irises, and tradescantia, and about my mother's Irish garden.

But it is a thorny thing, this garden/writing combination, this interplay between garden as idea and garden as living thing. Do

I ignore the germination of an idea to get the weeding done? Or do I put down the trowel and pick up the pen, lest the idea get washed away in a storm or buried too deep to sprout? Once I began to write in a more creative way than what might be required in blue books and research papers—once I began to write about my life—it was most often the pen that won.

FINALLY, AFTER COUNTLESS FAMILY GRADUATIONS AND DEGREES, my youngest child went off to college and I was left with a hole in my heart. As any gardener will know, when faced with a hole, you take your shovel and dig twice as wide and twice as deep. You take out half the tired, hardened soil and replace it with rich compost, slosh water in, and mix it into a soggy muck. Then you take a plant and spread its roots, settle it in with a wish or a prayer, pat down the soil around the tender stalk, and protect it with a layer of mulch. Watch it thrive, watch it flower, cut it back, share the flowers with a friend; dig it up, divide and share again; watch it die and thrive once more, seed itself, change color, send roots beneath the surface of the soil, pop up in unexpected places, migrate into neighboring beds, and eventually take on plants and weeds that behave in the same unruly manner. Eventually, you can find yourself steward of a small planet, presiding over 18 flower beds with a 19th in the making.

You can also find yourself in the throes of a grand obsession. I once visited three nurseries on a single Saturday morning, piloting a fertile field on wheels. Then I drove quietly up to the house, hoping to disperse the plants in shady places around the property before my husband could assess the damage. Alas, he emerged
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from the garage and caught me green-handed, wilted and defenseless in the mid-day sun. Two mornings later I walked into the garden to make space for my new arrivals. After 11 hours of tugging weeds, zapping thistles and scalping rotting foliage from the tops of bulbs—tasks that have prompted my husband to dub me Dr. Death—I stumbled up the steps to the kitchen, mumbling “I hate this garden. I can’t do this anymore. I have no life outside this garden.”


And yet everything in my garden—new flower beds and ponds, potting shed, greenhouse and cutting garden—was made to give me life in a time I thought I might not have any life at all.

So even on a day when I do nothing but dig tradescantia, I look around and know my garden has been good to me. While I may agonize over tempests and drought, pestilence and pests, aggressive miscreants and poor performers—and I may be scarred and hobbled, my cheeks stained with tears and the tips of my fingers leafy green—I understand that in my garden I have found, in many ways, my salvation.


This comes to me after a long winter when I can finally sink my hands into our loose and fertile soil and feel the dirt under my fingernails. It comes to me when I rise early to dig before the heat of the day and see the sunlight strike the lavender heads of the tallest irises, then slide down their silver leaves. It comes to me when I count the plants that have found their way to my garden in the hands of my friends; count the bunches of flowers I have harvested, arranged and delivered; count friendships found, nurtured and grieved for in the garden; count essays and images, lessons learned and virtues gained. And it comes when I catch the play of afternoon light on the pink grass behind the rarely sat-upon garden bench; or when I watch the sun set over the pond, turning westward-facing leaves translucent, back-lighting every vein on the red leaf of a hardy begonia.

Pat is often with me when I garden, reminding me that I’ll never tame, conquer and control every stalk of every plant. Pat learned to accept the chaos in her garden. She never wearied of its beauty, knowing how to love it and leave it when the time was ripe.

Pat still has lessons to teach. So does my garden. □



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