



# Beautiful Gardens

Helen Stewart  
Vancouver Island

Story by Dorothy Dobbie

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Imagine a wildflower paradise with stony pathways leading through billows of plantings, sheltered by ancient Garry oaks in a landscape pierced by Sitka spruce. This is the Vancouver Island paradise that is being shaped by Helen Stewart, an artist, gardener and writer. It has been her labour of love, of discovery and her imaginings for the past 30 years, since she and her family moved to the one-acre property, after leaving their

farm in Northern BC.

Helen is a gardener by nature, an artist by training and a labourer of necessity, having had to learn to work hard in order to live in the wilderness of her married home on a farm near McBride, between Jasper and Prince George. "My husband wanted to raise sheep," she said. What they had not considered was that this fertile land also nurtured "every wild animal that ate sheep." The second challenge was

inexperience in raising and shearing the animals. Their first attempt to do it themselves led to what Helen laughingly called "shameful sheep".

Added to the flock of sheep came five children, two of them adopted, and a half-acre vegetable garden. All this is more than enough for two people, but Helen's husband soon got a job as a professor and was away teaching for a good part of the year.

Born into a well-educated family



A selection of illustrations from Helen Stewart's book *Drawn into the Garden*.



and raised in the gentle hills of California, Helen was faced with a sharp learning curve. "I was young and healthy," she says, and she was not afraid of hard work. The rewards were bountiful. The valley soil was rich and the area blessed with gentle rains and long, lovely sunlit hours. She grew "huge, juicy vegetables" which she preserved in jewel-like jars of abundance.

In between, she drew, lovingly tracing the delicate patterns of the wildflowers and plants that sprang up everywhere in this untouched land. She made portraits of the fat cabbages and structured rows of vegetables. Weeding was a full-time job, but soon she came to love the "warm, rich soil, with the comforting sounds and smells of farm life, and the air itself, so fresh and clean."

Drawing led to keen observation and an intimacy with the plants that was very satisfying and full of wonder. The genetic gardening legacy she had

inherited from her great-grandfather (who managed a huge and important nursery in Rochester, New York) now also evolved, joining the artist's sensibility inherited from her great-grandmother who was an artist. The two merged in Helen Stewart, slowly developing the person she is today. "She brings light into other people's darkness," said Paul Destrooper, artistic director of Ballet Victoria, of this woman who shares her illumination with the community in which she now lives.

The Victoria garden is being

grown on a one-acre outcrop of rock, surrounding a 110-year-old home known as "Mossy Rocks", which was, when Helen arrived, a tangle of "morning glory, brambles and ivy" five minutes from the ocean. Faint traces of the garden grown by the original owner, who had worked on the Butchart Gardens, were still discernible here and there, but little remained. When they first bought the home, the children were still young and helpful; they pulled ivy, built tree forts and pushed many a wheelbarrow along with their mom. It took many years just to get some soil into place.

Helen started with heaps of chipped wood and leaves and truckload after truckload of soil. In her mind's eye she saw each area as a picture and set about studying what plants to grow. "It was like creating a painting outside," she said. She favours the delicate, airy plants such as gypsophila and plume poppy and butterfly bush.

She points out that there are no rhododendrons in her garden. "I only plant flowers I want to draw," she says. Among these are roses, too difficult to grow on a northern farm. Now she revels in her ability to grow her favourite, 'Cécile Brunner'. "This is the perfect rose," Helen says. "It has few thorns and a lovely scent—even the leaves are scented." It grows as a shrub or as a climber.

But none of this came without more of that hard work Helen had grown so accustomed to. Then her grandfather came to her aid by leaving her a small legacy to accelerate the making of her garden. Now the work began in earnest, with a gardener, Chris Ball, to help move stones and establish the rocky pathways.

The wood chips, leaves and soil began to meld, decaying with the help of some nitrogen and lots of rain. And layer by layer, the soil for

the garden-to-come was constructed. "You have to replenish layers every year," said Helen, because at the bottom of all the layers is bare rock. Now the soil is six feet deep in some places.

As time has gone on, gardening and drawing and gardening some more, Helen has become more in touch with and in tune with the very soil she so carefully constructs. The fact of using wood chips, learned from observing the natural work of the forest, she now sees as serendipitous; as they decompose, the chips encourage mould and fungus to grow. It is the network of fungal mycelium, as they break down organics, that helps bring life back to the soil. This allows for the growth of the millions of other organisms that are part of a healthy soil.

Helen, who has written and illustrated a dozen books for children and about gardening, is now busy working on a book that will

focus on what happens below the ground, a world that is every bit as exciting as that above, she says.

She still works every day she can in the garden and when she is not gardening, she is drawing, half a day each. The garden is her place for solving problems and she always has a project at hand to work on. In the garden, she escapes to another place where time seems to stand still.

"My garden has been a communal effort.... I like sharing my garden and my home. This has become a gathering place for parties, dances, charity events, art classes and concerts." Her many friends know it is a place of repose and reflection, a place to regain their spirit. And as Helen says, there is a bonus.

"At any time of year, I am able to pick bouquets for drawing or for giving away!" What better reward for a life hard lived! ☺