



Local artist and writer Helen Stewart sits in her garden with her bearded collie on a sunny January day. (Jane Skrypnek/News Staff)

Tales of natural beauty spring from Ten Mile Point garden

Drawn into the Garden is the latest work by Helen Stewart

JANE SKRYPNEK / Feb. 6, 2021 5:30 a.m. / ENTERTAINMENT / LOCAL ENTERTAINMENT



Spilling over with roses, peonies and poppies, 77-year-old Helen Stewart's one-acre garden has been used for innumerable charity events, weddings, art lessons, and even the odd ball.

When people see her stupendous Ten Mile Point property and refurbished dance-hall home, Stewart said they automatically assume she has led a wealthy and easy life.

"They have no idea," she said. "None."

Stewart grew up in Berkeley, Calif. and attended university before meeting her husband, a graduate student of anthropology with an interest in nomadic people, who decided they should move to a sheep farm in northern B.C. In 1965, the wilderness near Mount Robson where they settled was even more rugged and sparsely populated than it is today.

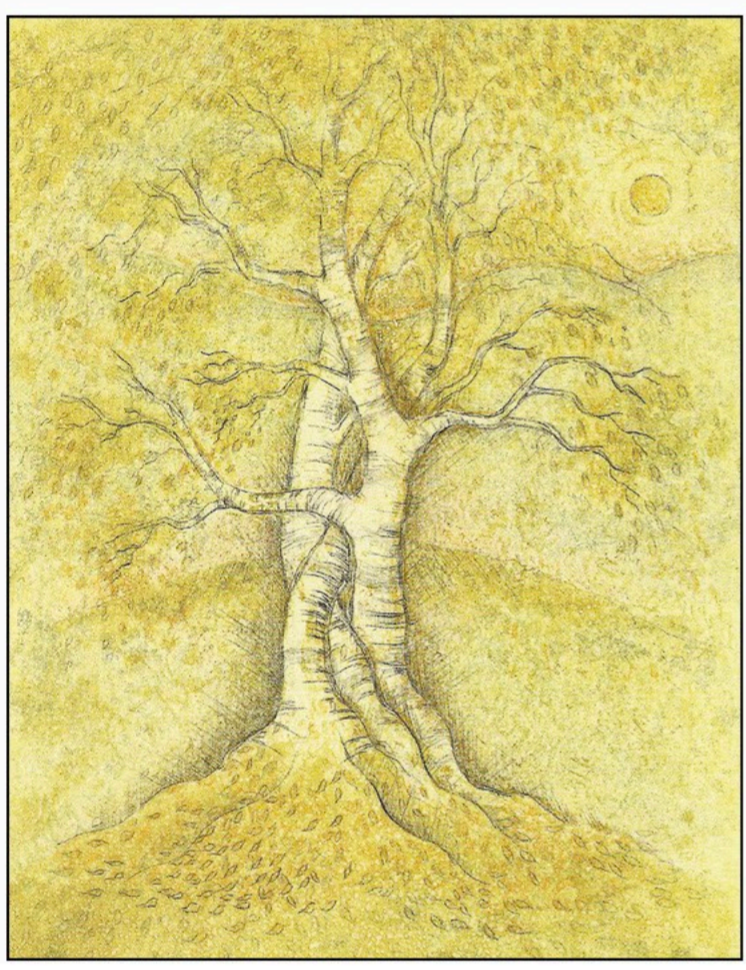
"A handful of stores, mostly rather forlorn looking, had the feel of a movie set, a temporary backdrop for an old western," Stewart wrote in her 2004 book, Berkeley to the Barnyard: A Far Cry From Home. "The town was depressing to me rather than interesting, perhaps because I viewed the world as an artist, not an anthropologist."



Helen Stewart and her five children. (Courtesy of Helen Stewart)

Writing with incredible detail and humour, Stewart recounts the adventures and hardships of learning to run a 350-acre farm and raise five children.

"Gradually," she wrote, "my expectations began to change. Getting through one day's work at a time was enough, and many days I felt happy just for falling not too far behind." Stewart's husband was a professor at the University of Calgary, and Stewart was often left to tend to an endless list of chores by herself.



A drawing from Helen Stewart's book, Berkeley to the Barnyard. (Courtesy of Helen Stewart)

For 15 years she learned to raise lambs, chickens and pigs, grow and harvest a multitude of crops, homeschool her children, and ward off hungry coyotes and wandering bears. It was a life unlike anything she ever could have imagined growing up in California. It was also a life that honed her skills, enhanced her appreciation for nature, and made creating her decades-long garden project possible.

When Stewart moved to Victoria 30 odd years ago, the property she now occupies was nothing but rock and ivy, but right away she knew it had potential.

"As soon as I saw it I knew I could have a beautiful garden," she said. It wasn't until Stewart and her husband separated and her children had moved out that she truly took on the project.

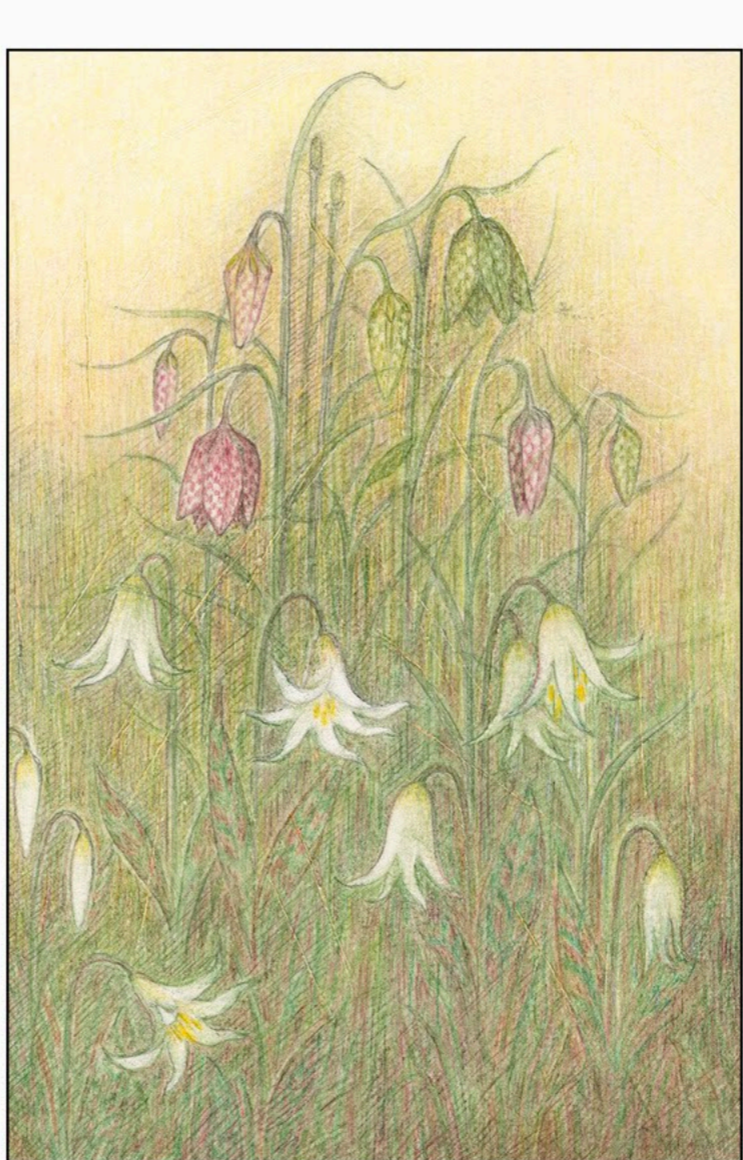
"There wasn't soil here so I had to build this all up," Stewart said. Her first task was to have 85 enormous truckloads of wood chips, leaves and mulch delivered. Even now, she still gets two truckloads a year for the continuous task of tending to her soil. It's something Stewart focuses on in her latest book, published last year, called Drawn into the Garden.

"A good gardener today must certainly be a keeper of the soil, sharing in the privileged work of the earth's continuing creation," she wrote. Drawn into the Garden is a sort of an encyclopedia of Stewart's garden, with informative and beautiful descriptions of the plants and creatures that occupy it.

"I plant only the things I want to draw," Stewart explained. Her book is full of her stunning illustrations. It is also a call for people to get back in touch with nature.

"I feel so strongly that we need to take better care of the land," Stewart said. "I feel like we're just committing suicide."

"Most people just don't have the awareness that they need to understand that we're all connected to the land and the trees and we can't survive without these connections."



A drawing from Helen Stewart's book, Drawn into the Garden. (Courtesy of Helen Stewart)

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Environmental degradation is something that distresses Stewart greatly. "My way of dealing with that is either by gardening or drawing. When something negative happens in my life, I try to balance it with something positive."

Stewart's garden is the place where she can find calm and connection to the earth.

"I think some people are just born gardeners. My happiest times when I was young were in my grandfather's garden, and my happiest times now are when I'm in my own garden."

She said people come to her garden because it makes them feel better. Before the pandemic, Stewart would teach art lessons there and tell people all about the plants that make it up.

"I always encourage people to pay more attention to nature, because it's so wonderful. I just feel we'd all be in a better place if we did that."

Stewart's books and artwork and a short documentary about Drawn into the Garden can be found at hestewart.com.

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