

Gardening

Showplace in Heath

By Pat Leuchtman
leisure Columnist

Growing up in England among a family of avid gardeners, Elsa Bakalar hated the garden. "I thought there was nothing worse than mucking about there all the time," she shuddered.

However, that was a fairly short-lived period and for many years now her consuming avocation has been her garden. Or more specifically, her gardens.

Elsa, teacher, gardener and director of Continuing Education at Greenfield Community College and her husband Mike, editor and publisher of the Shelburne Falls and West County News, have lived full time in Heath for only 3 years, but for 20 years they have been summering and gardening on their hillside. Now she can show off the grove of rhododendrons in back of the house, the handkerchief of a terrace outside the kitchen door planted with dwarf crabapple, English forget-me-nots, primroses, the rhubarb, asparagus and berry patches, the border along the drive, and random, curving flower beds in front of the house.

Tucked away behind the main flower beds is what Elsa calls her production garden where she starts her seeds, root cuttings and divisions. Some of these plants find their way into her own ever-enlarging beds and borders, but many she sells or uses to plant the gardens she installs for friends.

She doesn't use a greenhouse, but she does start many of her plants from seed. "I think so many people use bedding plants today because it takes so long to start your own perennial border. The seeds are planted in the spring and then in the fall the young plants can be moved to where they will bloom, but you usually don't get flowers until the second year.

"I remember once I visited the summer home of a student of mine in Newport, Rhode Island, and the student invited me to come after the garden had been put in. I didn't understand that, but the girl explained that in the spring the gardeners put in the flowering plants — instant garden — and after Labor Day, when the family left the house, all the plants were removed.

"But they're still alive," I protested. The girl just shook her head, "But, we're not there." It seems an extraordinary attitude. The gardens were display gardens just like the flower beds at Rockefeller Center that are changed every month."

Elsa does buy some plants from



Elsa Bakalar picks Catherine the Great Russian strawberries, which she had planted from seed in the spring.

leisure Photo by Betsy Reilly

nurseries such as white Flower Farm in Connecticut. She once bought two tiny bunches of iris, one white and one blue. Big clumps of those irises still bloom in her own garden and divisions have been planted in six other gardens.

"The quality does pay off in the end, even if the original price seems expensive."

One of the things Elsa likes about perennials is that they not only come back every year, they multiply by themselves and then can be divided and the garden made larger or they can be given away to friends.

"I divide about a third of the garden every year. I do it whenever I feel like it or when I get the chance, but there are some general guidelines. Plants that bloom very early in the spring should be divided at the end of the summer so they'll be settled in enough to give good bloom. Flowers that bloom late in the year can be divided early in the spring.

"Day lilies can be divided in the spring and they will still bloom that season, although not as well as they will the following year.

"With a big clump of hemerocallis (day lilies) I dig them up and divide the roots into four pieces like a pie. The center of the pie is dead and no good so it gets junked. Then

I gently pull off the new good sections of roots. About half of these roots will go to replace the plant that I've dug up, and I take the other small pieces and put them in the production garden where they will grow into nice round clumps. After a year I can sell them."

Shasta daisies can also be divided like day lilies Elsa explained.

Part one of a two-part article. □

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