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# Gardening

## 'Posy patch' grows into major gardens



By Pat Leuchtman  
leisure Columnist

*"I have lawns, I have bowers,  
I have fruits, I have flowers."*

*The Farmers Arms*

When Elsa Bakalar first started her garden in Heath, she made arrangements with a local farmer to come in and plow for her. She returned the following weekend and found a neat rectangular section plowed in front of the house. She immediately called the farmer and asked him what he had done. The farmer was surprised at her distress, knowing that you plant vegetables in long, straight rows. Finally he apologized saying that if he had known she wanted a "posy patch" he would have plowed a circle for her.

From that beginning she has been building, adding to and modifying the irregular beds in front of the house. Her gardens do not look like the ones of her childhood in England or the ones she has been trained to grow after years of courses at the

Botanical Gardens in Brooklyn or given by The American Horticultural Society. "I'm now starting these borders along the drive which are more conventional, using the tall ferns as a background and frame. And I keep trying to soften the hard lines of the beds carved out of the meadow."

A tour of the gardens is apt to be sidetracked by a detour into the woods surrounding the house where Elsa builds her compost piles. She used to be very scientific about them, even making sure they had reached the correct internal temperature before turning them which made her husband laugh. But now she is much more casual, mainly building the piles of grass clippings and kitchen refuse, turning them a couple of times and at the end of the year she has a supply of beautiful, rich compost. "It even smells good."

Whenever Elsa puts in a new plant, she always digs a large, deep hole and uses a generous helping of compost. She arranges the roots carefully, making sure they have lots of room and then gives the plant a long, deep watering.

"Lots of people take a seedling out to the garden, remove a little plug of earth and stick the plant in. If the roots are too long they'll double them up towards the surface, just like arranging a fancy hairdo. Then they give it a little sprinkling of water and wonder why it's dead in a week."

This past winter was very severe and Elsa unnecessarily apologizes for the sparseness of the garden. There are a few patches of earth showing and when I visited she was busy filling in the bare spots. "With so little snow this year there was lots of winter kill. I lost 58 perennials, 100 chrysanthemums and most of the roses. Even the shasta daisies died and they will usually survive almost anything."

Elsa says you usually can't see

any open soil in the garden. The plants spread and fill up the space and then it's time to divide them. She says it isn't even necessary to mulch to keep down the weeds. She once put in a friend's garden and when she came back to do some additional work she found that a cedar chip mulch had been spread around all the new plants.

She took her friend to task, while he protested that it would make the garden weed-free and what was he going to do with all the mulch now anyway. She assured him he could put it under his shrubs and it would be very nice or he could throw it over a cliff, but he could not put it in the flower garden where it would not only keep out weeds, but prevent the flowers from developing and spreading as well.

In spite of all the winter kill, Father Hugo, a lovely yellow shrub rose was still blooming as were the Siberian iris which probably feel right at home in Heath. Tall clumps of delphinium look strong and as though they will give a good show of bloom.

"Delphiniums do quite well up here because of the cool nights." I am reassured to know that the Heath weather doesn't discourage all plants and that it even helps others to thrive.

Elsa's garden is one that you hope you are lucky enough to see several times through the year because of the changing seasons of bloom. When I was there in mid-June, drifts of narcissus and daffodils had given way to magnificently blooming rhododendrons. Peonies and poppies were flowering profusely, but they would soon be making way for sweet peas.

Eventually the lavender hedge and the heathers would come into their own and on it goes. And there is always the bonus of a little horticultural education as Elsa explains how or why she does things. For that I was very grateful. □

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