

HOME & GARDEN

Garden courses tell what's new und



Recorder/Chuck Blake



At left, Elsa Bakalar teaches the "Summergarden" workshop at "Hilltop Garden," her summer home in the Heath hills. Above, she discusses the many possibilities of perennial gardening with the students in this Greenfield Community College non-credit course.

By LYNN STOWE TOMB
Recorder Correspondent

HEATH—Once a week, 30 people drove the long mountain road to the top of the West County hills to take the "Summergarden" course offered by Greenfield Community College. Taught by Elsa Bakalar at her summer home, "Hilltop Garden," the non-credit course explored the many possibilities of perennial gardening.

Mrs. Bakalar, who resigned this spring after two years as director of Continuing Education at the college, was surprised and pleased at the large enrollment. "I had to divide the class into a morning and afternoon session," she said. "The students met for lunch from noon to 1 p.m. to get to know each other."

Born and raised in England, where "everyone is a natural gardener," Mrs. Bakalar is the Barbara Woodhouse of gardening. She brings the same enthusiasm and understated humor to flowers that the British television personality brings to her dog training classes.

The West County workshops began two years ago with a course, "Growing and Cooking With Herbs," given by Connie Lewis, owner of the Kitchen Garden in Charlemont. This was the first "Community Service Workshop" or non-credit course to be held away from the college.

"These courses definitely fill a need," said Mrs. Bakalar. "We can employ people from the area who have a talent, and they're inexpensive."

"I want to widen the knowledge of gardening," she continued. "So people won't be running out in the spring to buy flats of annuals. The perennial garden is not limited to experts, and I try to teach the unrestricted potential for the individual."

"The 'Summergarden' course will be followed by cooperative workshops — 'Fall Garden' and, perhaps, 'Spring Garden,'" she said, "where the group would work in each member's garden, planning for next year, starting seeds and preparing soil. Some people can't face the challenge alone, and certainly working together is more fun."

This summer's course had six sessions. The first met on June 24 at the college, where Mrs. Bakalar lectured and showed slides. The next four weeks at Hilltop Garden provided practical experience for amateur gardeners. The last class was a trip to the Berkshire Garden Center in Stockbridge.

Elsa Bakalar came to this country in 1947 with the foreign service. She worked at the British Embassy in Washington, D.C., then came to New York City with the British Information Service. She met her husband, Michael, who now publishes the Shelburne Falls and West County News, in 1947.

From 1963-73 she taught at Ethical Culture, a private girls school in New York. During that time the Bakalars bought their home in Heath and found themselves with weekend guests from the school. "Since we brought the girls along in Heath anyway, I decided to start a camp." For eight weeks each summer, the city girls would garden, pick berries and make jam, sew and swim in the pond below the house.

She taught at Fieldston, a college preparatory school in Riverdale, N.Y., from 1973 until 1977, when the Bakalars came to western Massachusetts for good. The present gardens were planted that summer, and they rented a house in Charlemont for the winter.

Mrs. Bakalar came to GCC in 1979 to start the women's programs in continuing education. "There was a great need for retraining housewives for the job market," she said. She became the director of the expanded department in 1980.

"I resigned as director this year because I wanted to use my remaining active years working outside as much as possible," she said. "I'm 64, and it's now or never." She will remain with the college to teach the gardening workshops and to organize the "Study and Travel" courses. The tours have been to England and Scotland; Bermuda and Greece are coming up.

Beside teaching, Mrs. Bakalar gardens for other people. She has designed and planted and is maintaining five gardens this year. She also sells plants and seedlings. "I prefer to deliver and plant the flowers myself," she said. "Then I can guarantee their condition on arrival."

The first morning session at Hilltop Garden was a clear, sunny, but windy day. Mrs. Bakalar brought out a pile of sweaters and jackets, "woolies," she called them, and arranged everyone on benches to look down the gentle slope to the flowering gardens and the mountains beyond.

She started by explaining that choosing a site was very important. "The most effective way of looking at flowers is with a background," she said. "The contrast of a border garden in front of a wall or near a forest has appeal. My garden is not traditional, as it is seen against the enormous canopy of the mountains to the east."

The class of mostly women followed her about while she described the effects of the wet spring, insect control by companion planting, and bad habits of certain plants. Jumping from topic to topic, teaching through anecdotes, Mrs. Bakalar was always colorful and invariably humorous. "I try to meld people, make them feel happy about each other," she said. "No matter what I'm teaching, the class becomes a party."

Registration is open now for GCC's 'Fall Garden' community service workshop; for more information, call the Continuing Education department at 774-3131.

Frances' fine and private Arcadian garden

By PAT LEUCHTMAN
Recorder Columnist

When you pull into the driveway of John and Frances Fleming's house in Deerfield, you'll find that the house and barn are connected by a length of fencing stained a deep brown to match the other buildings. In this fence there is a gate shaded by a twining wisteria that leads into a very private world.

The chief feature of the fenced-in yard is an in-ground swimming pool bounded on three sides by flower borders. Swimming pools have become more and more common, but not much imagination has been shown in planning the pool areas. By harking back to a favorite neighbor's garden that Frances was fond of when she was a child in England, she has been able to create her own special and private place where she and her husband can relax, but which is also a delightful setting for summer parties.

Frances told me about that childhood garden on a recent visit. "I loved that garden. It was quite unusual because it was a sunken rock garden. You would go down four steps to the floor of the garden, and the sloping walls were filled with rocks and flowers. In the center was a goldfish pond rising up like a well."

"Of course, our yard and gardens are really nothing like that garden, but it was the feeling that I had when I walked there so long ago that I have tried to recapture."

The northeastern corner of the rock garden is marked by a large, spreading catalpa tree that blooms abundantly in the spring and provides shade for the garden below so that a wide variety of plants can be grown in a relatively small area.

BETWEEN THE ROWS

The garden is certainly private, walled as it is on two sides by the barn and the house, on the third side by a wire fence covered with heavy Concord grapevines and on the fourth by the rock garden that curves around the eastern end of the swimming pool. Beyond the rock garden is an expanse of lawn that climbs a steep hill, and from the western end of the pool you can just glimpse the vegetable garden that is edged with beds of annuals — petunias, impatiens, marigolds and allysum.

Many swimming pools are provided with little more than functional paving, fencing and lawn furniture, but the Fleming's pool is given an Arcadian setting that relaxes and refreshes. Within the yard there are several delightful planted areas, a shady garden in front of the house, the wisteria underplanted with violets and primroses and a narrow band of flowers along the sunny western fence, and the rock garden at one end of the pool — the outstanding feature.

Frances has chosen her plants so that she will always have a number of flowers in bloom. The day I visited, I admired the phlox that came in shades of white, pink and salmon, brilliant gallardias and mombrescia, which is grown from a bulb. It throws up long slender leaves, somewhat similar to iris leaves, and delicate stems covered with dazzling orange and gold trumpet-like flowers. The potentilla, a small shrub, was covered

with yellow blossoms, and Frances said it remains in bloom all summer. Shasta daisies, black-eyed Susans and anemiss or false chamomile were also blooming wildly.

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In the shade of the catalpa tree, ferns were growing luxuriantly, as well as myrtle with its small shiny leaves, and ajuga, a low, dense groundcover. If I had visited the garden earlier in the year, I would have been greeted by peonies, miniature and bearded iris, foxglove and bleeding heart. Lilies of the

valley and violets are also planted in the shade.

Still to come are the chrysanthemums, honesty (money plant) and geums. Without any difficulty at all I counted at least 35 kinds of flowers growing around the pool, and this in a space that was not more than 30 or 35 feet wide, which shows that you don't need enormous acreage in order to have a wide variety of flowers growing in healthy abundance.

Frances's garden has developed over time. It has not required enormous amounts of money expended in any single season, and she says many of her plants have been gifts from friends, cuttings or divisions from their own gardens. Sometimes she has even planted flowers from the wild like the black-eyed Susans and purple loosestrife that she brought into the garden from the marsh across the road. While it's very nice to be able to spend unlimited amounts of money at a garden center or nursery, that alone does not guarantee the creation of a beautiful garden. It takes knowledge, some imagination and patience.

Frances says that she does some of her best garden planning while floating lazily in the pool. She is able to examine the effect of what is already planted, propose additional flower beds, confer with the plants and dream dreams, remaining cool all the while.

