

Home/Garden

Don't be afraid to experiment in the garden

Recently I was fortunate to have the opportunity to meet the well-known horticultural photographer, writer and lecturer, Pamela Harper. She was on a busman's holiday, visiting gardens, and had come to our Heath hills to see and photograph Elsa Bakalar's perennial garden which is now in full and glorious bloom.

Pamela Harper was born and raised in England and she's been gardening and working with gardens for most of her life. She co-authored Perennials: How to Select, Grow and Enjoy with Frederick McGourty who edited the Brookly Botanic Garden Handbook series for 15 years. This has become a standard and useful reference for those gardeners who have developed a passion for perennials.

Her straight, corn-silk hair was tucked behind her ears like a school girl's, her voice was low, but she spoke with the authority of one who has years of experience and has some very strong opinions.

Pam's garden in Virginia has a little bit of everything. Perennials have to be very carefully chosen because of the hot climate and dry soil. After a beautiful spring full of bloom, July and August are so hot that many plants are forced into a summer dormancy. This is why she often travels during the summer when her own garden is least interesting and comfortable.

Then there is a whole long flowering season in the fall, often lasting into December.

Pam says that gardeners in the Northeast are lucky because perennials prefer climate with a cold winter.

However, you have to make use of plants that like your own particular circumstances of climate and soil.

She has adapted her ideas of what makes a perfect garden to take advantage of the Virginia weather. She uses the full gamut of plant materials including the flowering shrubs that do so well in the south, bulbs, trees and ground covers as well as perennials.

When I asked her if she had any fa-

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Between The Rows



vorite flowers she laughed and said usually her favorite was whatever was growing and blooming with most vigor and health. She did confess to a great fondness for yellow primroses that bloom in the spring because they were so much a part of her childhood.

Recently she's come to like yucca. Yucca does well in the south where the weather is hot and the soil may be sandy and dry, but Y. filamentosa and Y. glauca are both hardy in our

climate. The swordlike, basal leaves are succulent and there is a three-foot flowering stalk that bears a panicle of creamy, drooping flowers. I appreciate the yucca because it looks good no matter what disaster befalls it. Whether it's dry or wet, the foliage is always attractive.

When we were talking about gardening books, she said she quickly gave away Russell Page's classic volume, "The Education of a Gardener," because she simply wasn't interested in his stories about the grand gardens he designed for his rich clients. "It's the small creative garden that captures my interest. I like a garden with soul. Once a few landscape architects caught me up on that statement and invited me for a visit. We spent a couple of days discussing gardens, but I think the soul

of a garden comes from the inimitable contribution that an involved owner makes to the garden. You can buy design, but you can't buy soul."

I agreed that gardeners should feel free to experiment with their own interests and passions, but said that it was sometimes discouraging to realize how much time that experimenting takes.

Pam said, "You have to be willing to fail. You have to be willing to take the time to try a dozen things that don't work because that's the only way you finally get the thing that does. If you don't take chances, you'll end up with a perfectly adequate garden, but it will never be anything more. Take time, take chances. That's the only way you can create a garden that is individual — and even great."