

Home/Garden

McGourtys make gardening a family affair

Neither Frederick or Mary Ann McGourty started out as professional gardeners, but for the past six years Hillside Gardens in Norfolk, Conn., has been the center of their life.

Fred cast aside his work on a doctorate in political science over 20 years ago to begin working at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden. After a couple of years apprenticeship in the Herbarium, he took over the editorship of their horticultural manuals in 1968.

After meeting Mary Ann at a horticultural meeting, it didn't take Fred long to encourage her to take her interests in gardening more seriously - or for romance to blossom.

In 1979 they "sent the canary down the mine shaft" and began selling plants on the weekends. Within two years they were busy with a full time business. When they aren't propagating and selling plants, designing and installing gardens for clients or dashing off on speaking engagements, they write

Pat Leuchtman



Between The Rows

"We take turns cooking in the winter," Fred said. "This year it's my turn to write while Mary Ann cooks." He is working on "The Perennial Gardener," which will be published by Houghton Mifflin. This book will gather together articles that he's written, but at least half will be new material, with a focus more on interpretation, on how to use plants in different settings.

His first book, written with Pam Harper, "Perennials: How to Select, Grow and Enjoy," concentrated on the nuts and bolts of growing and is an excellent reference. The winter Mary Ann gave over the cooking chores resulted in the new "Taylor

Guide's, to Ground Covers, Vines and Grasses."

Mary Ann says that when they give advice or design a garden for a new gardener she likes to choose plants with good foliage, plants that don't depend on bloom alone for their interest.

Fred says he likes plants that also have a long period of bloom. They introduced the threadleaf coreopsis Moonbeam to the trade after they realized its merit: it's only about 15 inches high, has pale yellow flowers and is in bloom from mid-July to frost - usually around the first of October in his garden.

Fred becomes animated when he talks about plants. Low growing shastas are also good. Silver Princess is about 18 inches tall, and starts blooming in late June and goes on all summer. Achillea Moonshine and the purple coneflower are also in flower most of the summer.

Feverfew blooms all summer

and is a wonderful cut flower. We pinch it back just as we do the regular fall blooming chrysanthemums. It delays the blooming time but the plant is more compact and produces twice as many flowers. Feverfew does spread a lot, but you can help control that by cutting off the dead flower clusters. The proper name, Chrysanthemum parthenium, refers to the Parthenon. Plutarch tells a story that while the Parthenon was being built, one of the workers fell ill and was revived with a decoction of feverfew. Hence the name parthenium.

Mary Ann is equally passionate and has empathy for the new and struggling gardener. "Beginners need encouragement. If they have success with plants that are more carefree and enjoy themselves, they'll be more likely to continue on and experiment with other plants, including those that might need a little more coddling.

"When we suggest flowers to a

new gardener, we put the emphasis on plants that will give good results without too many troubles, plants that aren't prone to disease or pests or other troubles. For this reason we wouldn't recommend phlox which is susceptible to mildew. Delphiniums are wonderful and beautiful, but we would never suggest them unless a buyer particularly wanted them and was willing to take the trouble to stake, and take that extra step of care."

Hillside Gardens has grown to include about 25 flower borders and is open from the first of May to the first of October from 9-5 except on holidays. There is no mail order. Because they concentrate on uncommon

perennials which cannot be supplied by large wholesalers, they must do all their own propagation. This limits the size of their sales. However, they welcome visitors and customers during the growing season.

Fred noted, "England has a tradition of opening private gardens to the public, not necessarily every day, but perhaps a few days during the season. It's an opportunity to see a private garden, see how plants are used that they might not have thought of, or conversely, see something they hate and can vow never to duplicate. I wish a similar tradition would take root here. Garden Open Today."



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