

A Conversation with Alexandra



What inspired you to undertake the garden restoration?

Optimism and naiveté, mostly. My husband and I grew up watching our parents in their gardens, but didn't appreciate it, or participate in any memorable way. Perhaps we shared a latent need. I guess we learned through osmosis. When we had an opportunity to purchase a property with a near century-old garden, the project became an ode to history, and an ode to my mother. The fact that it was a ravine lot made it especially enticing, as I grew up wandering along my sanctuary of river valley trails in one of the longest urban parklands in North America.

What was the greatest challenge you faced?

Two things. The garden posed physical challenges, as it partially rests on a steep slope of an escarpment, with limited access on all sides. The base consists of a bog, spring-fed ponds from underground streams, and a natural forest. Across the property, soil conditions vary from wet to dry, and shady to sunny. It proffers extreme variation across approximately an acre of land. The garden was overrun with tall noxious weeds, and many of its original plants were dead or dying. The old abandoned stone garden structures were in serious disrepair a bridge over one of the ponds, and a glorious pagoda adjacent to the bog were crumbling. Unexpectedly, the project became a ten-year commitment, and our ability to complete it depended on the seasons, the weather, our patience, and the ability to find the right help along the way.

Equally, I struggled with the notion of allowing the natural world to take its course versus re-creating the semi-landscaped garden of old. I believe that to appreciate nature, you have to be in it, and sometimes when you're in it, you harm it. We tried to make thoughtful decisions and to balance accessibility and enjoyment with preservation. When my mother was only able to move around in a wheelchair, I became more appreciative of accessible public gardens.

What's the most surprising thing you discovered in your garden?

We are less than ten minutes from the city's center, and although office towers loom in the distance, we discovered a treasure trove of wildlife – deer, fox, hares, ducks, frogs, raccoons, squirrels, gophers, skunks, and a myriad of visiting birds. It's a magical, secret escape in the heart of urbanity.

Other than the wildlife, I discovered myself. Over my ten-year journey, I studied and learned about trees, shrubs, and flowers. Each plant's qualities reminded me of a special person in my life, and the more I uncovered, the more I examined my past, family relationships, and my current relationship with my son. The restoration took on an almost spiritual role, and helped me reconcile my love of gardening with that of my parents. As I untangled the past, I learned to accept my family's legacy and developed the desire to share it with my son. Ideally, he will carry it into his future.

What did you learn about yourself and your relationship with your parents?

I learned, belatedly, about forgiveness and about perspective. When I was young, I resented my parents' detachment and their lack of presence and attention. As an adult, with the benefit of history, I now appreciate their hardships and their sacrifices. Thankfully, our perspective evolves and shifts from self-centeredness to compassion and appreciation as we grow older and accumulate a few knocks of our own. Sadly, as I mention in my memoir, I became a real daughter when there was no one left to call me one.

Was it difficult to reconcile with your parents?

Yes. I now realize that my mother was living forward, and didn't share her early experiences because she wanted to protect us – and herself – from her painful past. In contrast, my father locked himself into a shell of introversion, a captive of his past. For years, I was caught in this silence, this emptiness, thinking I was the cause. I do wish that they had shared, told their stories, because I would have belonged to something. Anything. Identity is important, and if we don't give our children something to tether themselves to, they will seek other forms of belonging elsewhere. I did, for better and for worse, and finally I adopted my husband's family as my own. The love and safety they provided gave me the courage to research my own roots. I am now reconciled with my parents but wish it could have been different. Today, I *over-explain* everything to my son in compensation. He'd probably prefer a little more mystery.

You appear to be besotted by David Suzuki and Gordon Lightfoot. Why?

I am indeed! These were the two men that filled the quiet of my youth, David on television, and Gordon's poetic lyrics, many about the natural world. My husband teases me about the two other (older) men in my life.

You write about family legacy. How do you define it?

My parents, despite their almost opposite personalities, intersected on the common ground of self-sufficiency, independence, and a strong relationship with the land. Their relationship with nature was profound. It healed them, it fed us, and they fed the ravine wildlife that, in turn, ravaged their lettuce patch. My mother didn't seem to mind when her crops were destroyed by bad weather or rodents. It was part of a natural cycle she embraced, although I didn't understand it as such. Even my father's solitude encompassed the outdoors. They seemed to sense the seasons, the humidity, and impending storms. They loved rain, snow, and sun. All plants and animals. And when they bought half a cow to put by for the winter, they respectfully used every part, minimized any waste, and prepared the meat themselves. Their respect for nature was pure and authentic, and their legacy remains the deep connection to nature that nourishes and enriches me today.

Your relationship with nature is your new religion. How so? Is this a new idea?

It is for me, but nature has played a role in religion as far back as the Ancient Egyptians' worship of gods that represented and controlled nature, and the early fundamentals of Taoism, in which all things are born of, and returned to, nature. I think nature's parallel randomness and perfection, and its uncontrollability make it something easy for us to worship. My personal relationship with the outdoors is one of faith and experience. Nature's purity continues to feed and heal me physically and spiritually, although I don't necessarily understand the mechanics of how. The mystery doesn't bother me; I simply accept that it is essential to my health and happiness.

You call soil the new Prozac. What's the story?

A bacterium called *Mycobacterium vaccae* in soil has been scientifically proven to enhance mood. We inhale it as we garden or encounter soil at close range, and apparently it increases the production and release of serotonin, enhancing our feelings of happiness. This research was first published in March 2007 in *Neuroscience*. And the more we play in the dirt, the more benefits we breathe in! In fact, there is a lovely Japanese expression that reflects this: *shinrin yoku*. It means, “a trip to bathe in the forest”.

How many gardening/nature books do you own?

About 200.

How does one impart the love of nature to the new technology-focused generation?

Like everything, proper balance is key. And each can enhance the other, as my son taught me with his beloved technology. His camera and his sophisticated diving equipment have allowed him to see aspects of nature that used to be inaccessible and unknowable. We now examine the infinitesimal molecules of a plant and the deepest seascapes with technology. We need to accept the reality and power of technology, and show our kids what it can teach us about nature. We also can't underestimate the power of leading by example – the more we do, the more our children will emulate, if not now, certainly later.

Then, we simply need to go outside and play.