

My father is an intensely avid gardener, now, at 84, more than ever. He spends entire evenings and whole days working in his garden. But I know there is not much work in a garden so he must simply be consorting with angels. A second generation Italian -- conceived there and born here, returning to live in Italy as a very young boy -- he gardens romantically and is fiercely loyal to the memory of his mother and her gardens and also of generations of Italian mountain gardeners.

He has always grown fruit trees and grapes like his fellow Tuscans, herbs for his kitchen, and fig trees. He grew a pitiful fig in a pot in our Chicago home which he faithfully drug in and outdoors each year. It produced one fruit a year for our trouble. Now in northern Mississippi he has a grove of 15 foot fig trees and I'm sure he feels very much at home.

Of course, he grew his own vegetables (and had time for a business and a family). Eating well was at the center of our lives, still is, and when he serves food he has grown and prepared it is always with great anticipation and delight. And you better love it!

Flowers are still another passion of his. A garland of wisteria graced my childhood window and a hedge of lilac enclosed and fragrancd the garden with bridal wreath at its feet. All of this fragrance, food, herbs, flowers, vegetables, trees, fruit trees skillfully were arranged into a small suburban garden northwest of Chicago.

Now my father gardens in Mississippi and I garden northeast of Memphis. He grows here what he grew there with varying degrees of success. Alas, no lilac. He has delighted in trying a larger list of plants that grow well in the long growing season of the hot humid South.

He admires my 5-acre garden, but he winces a bit when I suggest he try some of my weedy wildflowers in his garden. He knows from sixty years of gardening in two very different climates that there are really only a few great perennials and life is too short and he far too romantic to bother with less. So, he has had a few dalliances here in his new 6-year old garden, but this year I noticed he is returning to those flowers that will quite likely live on well past the life of the gardener. Those few that are truly marvelous, not nice or curious or that have "interesting foliage."

It is a small group of drop dead flowers and fragrances so tough as to be sometimes called "common" and so beautiful in combination they could be considered the sin of pride. Peony, Iris, Lily, Rose and Clematis. If we could grow only one, he would choose roses and I would choose lilies, but he would surely smuggle in a few others under the cover of night.

Peonies: I don't support mine; instead of wire supports I let them tumble over a dwarf evergreen shrub (Cariss Holly), or onto dwarf daylilies or even a large stone. If you stagger them between bearded Iris the Iris could lend some support and bloom together.

Bearded Iris: you know, those large blades of foliage everyone digs up and forces upon you at some time in your life inevitably. Why, because they are indestructible. Well, you could over-water them. They are often ignored because of this obnoxious habit so take a stand and select your own. Endless varieties. Put them about midway in your flower bed. The foliage becomes quite handsome when surrounded by other plants. As with Peony, don't plant too deep; they both like the tips of their roots to be exposed in winter. Feed them or ignore them and you will be blessed yearly with more divine blossoms.



Lilies: My father collected Lilies. Not Hemerocalis (daylilies), but Liliium: Madonna lilies, Asiatic lilies, and species lilies. His favorites are L. auratum. Both are highly fragrant, stunning beauties with impossibly homely legs. Be sure to plant them behind other plants with good foliage; the peony, for example. Here in the South they grow in full sun to half shade. Their only enemies are poor drainage and Voles. (Voles are vegetarian mice. I've unfortunately become an expert on them. If you don't have them don't even think about them or they will come and get you.) I saw them planted in daylilies to hide their homely legs. Ingenious. They bloom after the daylilies and I've never seen a vole eat a daylily.

Roses: I don't care for "Rose Gardens" by themselves and believe that planted alone in groups of the same they are disease magnets. But tucked into a perennial border and not over-watered even I cannot deny their beauty. I prefer shrub, musk and a well selected climber, as part of the border or garden, not the main character. I highly suggest "the Fairy," pink all summer, a variety my dad calls "Seven Sisters," red repeat blooms; and all of the "Meidelland" shrub roses. A Musk Rose is a must for fragrance and a Tea Rose or two. Don't over-water them and cut out the dead wood in early March.

Clematis: These grand vines covered our entire chainlink fence. All they ask is for a full sun location with mulch to shade their roots. If you wish to spoil them give them a cup each of manure and bone meal each year. They are misunderstood because they take a full three years to start really producing and until that time will disappoint...but thereafter will dazzle year after year. Cut them to ground March 1st.

These are my father's favorites. I think he has very good taste. A garden with a few of these or only these would be enough. Once property sited they will thrive with less water than you can imagine. We should all be so fortunate.

Have a glorious Garden Season!

A Nursery Inside A Garden

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