

Perhaps it started with a recurring girlhood dream, one I had often of being a dark-haired jungle princess whose companions were wild animals and who walked barefoot under a canopy of green. It is certainly one of my longest lasting relationships.

It has been a romance like few others. It has been powerful, turbulent, impetuous, hard work and rewarding.

Perhaps it began in my childhood with flowers in my father's garden: spring flowers, Easter flowers, the fragrance of wisteria outside my bedroom window.

Or perhaps it was the leis my mother made for me to wear around my neck; garlands of Rose of Sharon.

Maybe it was my first contact with warm spring soil, planting my very own sweet peas with miraculous results and insane fragrance. I've never been quite so successful with them since.

In adolescence I turned to the local fields and forests seeking refuge and privacy, feeling a kinship in the wild to the wild stirrings within myself yet unnamed. It was in a field where I smoked my first cigarettes and watched the sky and often the sunset. It was in a meadow near a grove of trees where I was chastely courted by a dear and handsome friend. It was under a canopy of trees where some not so chaste kisses resulted in my face blistered with evidence from poison ivy, which in the dark seemed a heavenly groundcover that sheltered us from the rain. And even this betrayal did not deter me.

As a young woman, I chose to travel often. I have slept in glades of fern and fields of grass, under magnificent trees and on bare desert floors. In a city, near the farms, off the road, and off the trail there is always a spot of wildness uncultivated or cultivated and neglected, and sometimes trimmed and mowed and planted where I find myself drawn and sheltered. This is the thread that is with me, always and everywhere unnoticed and ignored by me, and these are the elements I bring into my garden designs.

The plants, the trees, the meadows (even a meadow of unmowed urban median strip), the fuzzy edges where mystery abides. The unchained corners, the untrimmed hedge, the edges of the farmers' fields that break the monotony of the plow. These are my loves and I give myself to all of them, freely, barefoot, a dark-haired jungle princess.

I have cultivated many gardens. I have cared for the gardens of others, carefully preparing the soil and removing the weeds, staking the peonies and trimming the hedges. I have visited huge, glorious Botanical Gardens, trimmed and tagged, tributes to collectors and volunteers. These I see now have been merely dalliance.

I have indulged my passion in greenhouses and nurseries. In sheer lust I have gathered, caressed and planted hundreds and thousands of various beauties: many have thrived, some have not. I have spent hours and dollars on irresistible lovelies, full knowing they would betray me: they would not live but briefly. I have done this repeatedly and without remorse.

I planted a garden in Chicago in a garbage-strewn lot, in the cracks in the pavement, inside the fence and beyond. Inside it was orderly, outside it was a little wild, and the wild one gave me the greatest joy and surprises. It survived children and dogs and every indignity, even a drunken wino who saw in the furry foliage of the carrots a feather bed.

An Unexpected Romance Gardening

By Diane Meucci May/June 1995

The wildness calls to me, it calms me, it reaches something inside me where a not very dangerous, very tamed and civilized wild animal lives...barefoot.

I have gardened in Memphis for 10 years. I have enclosed myself in a cultivated wildness. I turned my 1/3 acre of lawn into paths and turns and nooks and shelter, surprises and discovery. Any spot of earth can be a wildlife refuge. My gardens are a trek in the mountains and a pause in a meadow, however small.

Here I have encountered wild beasts as well, and they are my companions. Frogs and snakes have crossed or cleared my path. Hovering hummingbirds, drunken butterflies and a variety of bee that is extremely curious, greeting me every morning flying to my front door and gazing into my face. All of this on a city lot.

Now I choose to engineer wildness: a civilized wilderness always accessible and available to me and my clients. The animals nod their approval.

My cats have numerous stalking adventures through fern, flowers and grass, succeeding rarely in capture but never ceasing in pursuit. My oldest cat snores his endless approval. This romance, this love affair, took me entirely by surprise. I never set out to or made plans to become a gardener, a horticulturalist, or the mistress of nature. It was an accident of living. Like many of my dearest friends, I often ignored her and noticed her seldom. And she has persisted, calmly, steadily, quietly and occasionally raging as an ice storm or tornado to get my attention. Looking back over nearly four decades, she has been faithful to me more than I have to her.

So now I am a landscape designer. I didn't choose it. It chose me. I have planted and plucked. I read, watch, observe.



My current laboratory is a five-acre plot, much more than is necessary, a sheer indulgence. I have opened forest floors, restored meadows, built a pond, planted irresistible lovelies.

All of which I have done before on a much smaller scale. I battle with voles, triumph over drought, frost and kudzu. Only the size and the enemies have changed.

The romance continues. I come here clothed for battle or barefoot and occasionally naked. I plan it, I control it. I watch. I listen. I shape it and it shapes me.

The birds at times sing a horrendous noise, the frogs are a jazz combo. The great blue heron, four feet tall, helps himself to my fish. The snakes scurry away, (they should be eating voles). The green heron screams a warning that he is the rightful owner of this pond. I say eventually.

In a city lot, an average suburban lawn, or on five acres, I plan, I shape, and I cultivate. I bring wildness to the backyard, controlled and safe.

I am the dark-haired jungle princess. Barefoot. A little wild.

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