

Saving the Good Stuff

A small memorial garden gets a new life 15 years later.



Jan's sign, surrounded by marigolds. *Right:* Judy Carson watering the restored garden late in the day in early June.

BACK IN THE SUMMER of 1998, Judy Carson and I established a butterfly garden at the Orchard at Altapass in memory of Jan McKinney Conley, a mutual friend who had died a few months earlier. We had all kinds of good intentions at the outset, foremost among them to tend the garden with assiduousness, as any a memorial to our stalwart friend deserved. Jan had been born with soft bones, a chronic condition that caused her a lifetime of pain. Although she had spent much of her childhood and youth in casts and braces, she had gone to college and worked as a chemist until disability forced her retirement. Then, in her thirties, she was diagnosed with breast cancer that, despite treatment and a mastectomy, recurred, metastasized and killed her in her 41st year.

For awhile, we kept Jan's Butterfly Garden in trim. But we were both busy, and as the years passed, it tumbled pretty far down our priority lists. Still, its butterfly

bushes (buddleia) and perennials – golden-rod, phlox, liatris, asters and other diehards – managed to hold their own and to bloom, attracting swallowtails, fritillaries, migrating monarchs and a trickle of parkway travelers who stopped by the Orchard to sample its apples, music, ice cream and fudge.

From time to time, Judy was able to recruit a few good volunteers to help out in the garden, but eventually catch-as-catch-can maintenance wasn't enough to keep the garden from becoming a weed patch. Poison ivy invaded a row of chinquapins that had been planted at the top of the garden, and infiltrated the buddleia. Bronze fennel I'd donated (it's one of the host plants for black swallowtail caterpillars) self-seeded exuberantly. Catbriar sent its lateral roots zigzagging throughout the garden. Grass crept in everywhere. We were embarrassed by our negligence; in the fall of 2011, we resolved that, come spring, we'd restore the garden.

Last March's unnaturally warm weather let us get an early start. We agreed to spend a day a week in the garden, weather permitting. A good decision, it turned out; we hadn't quite realized what a mess we had on our hands. Such a mess – let us count the ways! – that, had it not been for the proud little sign we'd erected 14 years earlier proclaiming it "Jan's Butterfly Garden," we might have given up and let nature take its course. The well-anchored sign had stayed in place, but almost nothing else had, since the garden was on a slope. Rocks that outlined its borders and central path had slumped and slid. So had the mulch that had been applied over the years. Most disheartening of all, we found that some no doubt well-meaning orchard maintenance man had, some years back, laid down swaths of heavy black plastic to suppress weeds. Garden debris and mulch had buried the plastic, in places to a depth of 18 inches, and weeds had taken root on top of it.

To save the good stuff – the gift shop has a sign on its roof proclaiming that as the Orchard's mission – we first had to get rid of the bad: plastic, poison ivy, catbriar, mint, and grass. Simultaneously, there was out-of-control good stuff that needed taming. I had thought it would take us two or three weeks to get everything cleaned up. How wrong I was!

The garden, roughly square, is split by its central path. A tulip poplar had taken root by the path, roughly in the garden's center. We'd allowed it to remain because tiger swallowtail butterflies, in their caterpillar stage, feed on tulip poplar leaves. Part of the garden's mission is to provide food plants for the larva of favorite butterflies as well as flowers for the adults. Whether the tiger swallowtails who show up in such abundance in the garden avail themselves of the poplar leaves for egg-laying I have no idea. The tree's greater virtue to us was its shade, which moved with the sun. As spring

melted into summer, we learned to match our sequence of chores to its motion. On hot, sunny days, we confined our work in parts of the garden that were never shaded to early morning and late afternoon. Small wonder that that tree was one of our favorite garden plants last summer.

In March, when shade wasn't an issue, we worked wherever we needed to dig in. Our immediate challenge was to remove the previous year's deadwood, so we could see what we had to work with, and what was where. This was partly because we'd failed, when we laid the garden out, to remember that while visitors could stay along the perimeter and on the central path, we garden maintainers needed continual access to every square inch of ground. Since vast reaches of the garden were unreachable from the path or perimeters, we needed to add sub-paths, particularly in the garden's lower half, where low-growing perennials and annuals were concentrated.

So that's how we began: getting rid of dead stuff and making paths. Judy pruned out eight-foot-tall Joe-pye weed flower stalks; I clipped brown seedheads from clumps of sedum; we teamed up to wrestle the black plastic out. We let the maintenance men haul it off, but we carried the dead stuff to a flattened spot above the garden to begin a compost pile. This year we'll use what's broken down in it to enrich the garden's soil. Because the Orchard wasn't yet open, we could work uninterrupted; because it was cool – and by switching back and forth between arduous and less-demanding chores – we were able to put in eight-hour days.

There were discouraging moments. The morning I began clawing out the grass carpeting the area around Jan's sign, I thought I would never get it all out. Once danger of frost was past, we planted annuals that didn't mind poor soil – nasturtiums and marigolds – near the sign. I direct-seeded the nasturtiums; Judy and I splurged on a few marigold starts. At first they looked

pretty forlorn, marooned in all that bare soil. They'll fill that space as they grow, I told Judy. And they did.

In places, we spared plants we later removed. Foremost among these were clumps of purple clover, a legume with a deep taproot whose blooms are beloved by butterflies and bees. The clover held the topsoil in place, mined the subsoil for minerals and moisture, and fixed nitrogen in the soil. When it got leggy, we cut it back; where it crowded other plants, we dug it out. We moved plants around; I brought perennials I didn't need from my flowerbeds, and zinnias I'd grown from seed. We bought bags of mushroom compost and some organic fertilizer to trowel into transplant holes. Judy watered plants as we set them in, and as needed between our work sessions. When the mountains baked in a June heat wave, she kept Jan's garden alive.

As the season progressed, we endured the never-ending task of buddleia dead-heading. We set rocks back in place along paths and perimeter. We zapped poison ivy and pulled out thousands of fennel seedlings. By midsummer, we had the whole garden more or less the way we wanted it. Thanks to the tulip poplar, and air moving up or along the mountainside, even hot days – and there were plenty – were bearable.

We worked harder than any dog of my acquaintance. We drank lots of water; by day's end, we were filthy, exhausted – and exhilarated. We discovered the deep pleasure of working together, and of enjoying each good thing: tree swallows feeding their young in a nearby nest box; the echinacea when it bloomed; painted ladies and great spangled fritillaries. Resting in the tulip poplar's shade, we recalled our old friend Jan. "Don't you think she'd be proud now of how her garden looks?" we asked – and knew the answer. If you're down our way this summer, stop by and see it. We can promise butterflies, bees and flowers in bloom – and clippers to borrow if you feel like deadheading. 🍷