

Imagination... Lorna's garden

By Judith Wright© Photos by Lorna Russel

Published in The Gardener, Winter 2015

On a January afternoon, Lorna and I are in gardening mode, perched with our coffee cups at the windows overlooking her snowy back yard. Minutes ago, we were in her basement, viewing slides of lilies—yellows, rose and scarlet—colors too bright for our hibernating eyes. We emerged, blinking, the whole carousel of seasons still burning on our retinas, to this pure winter snowscape: whiteness mounded over dormant lily beds, stark sunshine broken by birch branch and pine bough. Can there really be such thing as summer, with soft breezes, verdant greens and splashy golds?



Snow-tufted bits of sculpture peep from beneath the snowy covering of Lorna's winter garden. Uprturned Chinese pots wear powdery snow caps. It is a very different garden from its summer self, but no less intriguing for that. Lorna has lived in this house for different periods of her life for over sixty years. Hers is a different kind of garden from the one she grew up in.

"I wanted something more exciting, more imaginative," she said. "One thing suggested another and so it emerged."

Lorna is a painter. The garden was her first art form, practiced as her own children were growing up. She is quick to credit that all things build upon what comes before, that no garden is built in a season or succession of seasons, or even a single lifetime. Creativity requires more than vision.

"Not that I'm that patient," she laughs, "but I do work away at things over time." She began with a pool on each side of a cement path, then a cedar walk to make the path appear to be a bridge. The pools needed more relationship to one another, so the path looped back into a cloverleaf. No grand plan—that would be a lifeless thing.

There is a similarity between the way she paints and the way she gardens. Her canvases are large, worked and reworked with layers of color. At the height of summer, her double-wide garden is ablaze with color. She pays special attention to light. There is water, always. Water looks different in every season, every day, every hour, she tells me. Graduations of foliage evoke a kind of natural progression, in a painting, in border lining a path. Perspective unites the whole. Both the quirky and visionary aspects of her garden appeal to me: the stone rabbit, the greyhound with doves. What Lorna has chosen to develop and what she has left alone speaks of insight, humour, and wonder.

Just as there is a season for everything, what shows prominently in January will not feature later in the year. Lorna moves things around in her garden. Whole scenes emerge or are seemingly painted out. A fountain shifted here, a row of lanterns there; it's a year-round magic show of disappearing pots and reappearing features. Never was there a garden so constantly in transformation, never mind the seasonal changes.

It takes a certain courage not to settle into garden complacency—the tendency to become overly fond of what we know. Lorna points out that gardeners tend to conserve and re-use, and conservation is the mother of re-invention. A tiny tea house, built many years ago, has become a storage shed. A door became a gate; a gate, a window. What captures the eye on this January

afternoon are the deep channels worn by Tiva, Lorna's dog, winding over and around the invisible footpaths. Those paths echo the patterns of the lacy cast-iron gates -- handsome black cut-outs against the snow. Lorna has a passion for cast-iron ornaments. "Japanese rococo," she calls her garden style.

At the back of the garden, two majestic spruce trees tower above the cedar shed, Lorna's summer studio. "I can almost pretend I'm at the lake," she says. We talk about summers passed, Lorna and her family at Emma Lake. Those summers have left their stamp. "When we weren't travelling with my dad to his research plots, we were at the lake. When I was little I liked to lie on the top bunk of the cabin, with the roof right above my head, listening to the chipmunks or the rain on the roof." The great sheltering arms of the spruce are what now conjure the northern Lakeland, sentinels over the ponds.

During most of the year, the ponds are the prominent features of her garden, but they are mere suggestions now under the snowy covers. In the winter garden almost *all* is suggestion and mystery: the curve of an iron crane, the white cups of a snowy candelabra, a lion's face emerging from the fence.



Imagination: one idea leads to another. Winter is for day-dreaming, we agree. In winter everything is potential, and nothing need be compromised, wrote the wonderful garden writer, Mirabel Osler, a wonderful garden writer. In *A Gentle Plea for Chaos*, she describes the daydreams of gardeners in winter as stones cast out, rippling towards a limitless horizon. “Winter is a time when everything seems possible, when any wild and outrageous idea can be contemplated before being banished as unrealistic.”¹

The afternoon glides by as Lorna and I talk about our summer garden plans. Another arbour, or more lily beds? A pergola; no, why not a tree house? Four o’clock shadows gather as we pour over nursery catalogues. Sixty-one varieties of daylilies slumber dormant in Lorna’s garden, and she can’t wait to order more. We count the weeks forward, reckoning on our fingers, to the time when we can put in our catalogue orders—not too early or we’ll stuck with dried out duds, and not too late or they won’t get a good start.

We know better than to count the *days* until spring. It will require a leap of faith to get us through February and March. We *need* to believe in spring and summer, in bounty and color and promise. Gazing out the window from the snugness of the house, I try to picture those secluded summer corners and the surprises in store: jewelled anterooms of green, lamps and sculptures in odd places. I imagined the double-flowering plum and the Persian lilac in bloom. The birch in spring catkins, the mountain ash and the amur maple in their royal autumn colors. One thing following another.

But even now in January, this snowscape—glittering and subtly shifting color—is a vibrant part of the life of the garden. Lorna has filled the iron umbrellas of a rain tumbler with bird seed. Chickadees made seed sketches in the snow, burbling and chirping. Their notes sound bright, immediate and crisp, in the coldness. Winter has its place in the garden.

¹ Mirabel Osler *A Gentle Plea for Chaos*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 1989.