

HAROLD'S GARDEN

Harold's garden would not likely have won him any awards but Harold was not, I think, interested in awards. He was interested in his garden, which appeared all-at-once and fully planted every spring for many years just when you were beginning to wonder if Harold had given it up. Three substantial two-storey wood frame houses, all built around 1911 when the Edmonton community of Oliver was taking shape, sheltered the garden from what grew to be a busy north/south thoroughfare. The garden, laid out in long rows and rototilled once a year, looked out of its place and time. But then, so did Harold.

By the time Harold began his garden, maybe in the 1990s, many of the original houses and businesses along 116th Street had been replaced by high rise apartments and walk-ups. Harold lived in one of these, just a few steps from his garden. At first it looked as though the garden had been attached in some way to the three imposing frame houses, but an old insurance map showed that it had once had a small house on it, a house that faced 102nd Avenue and would have been humble in contrast to its three stalwart neighbours. How long the lot had been vacant I didn't know but Harold told me it belonged to a Chinese gentleman who had no objections to the annual garden.

Harold was pretty old when I first recognized him as the gardener, though exactly how old it was hard to tell. He was of medium height and what hair he might have had was always covered by a cap. Somehow the cap made the top of his head look pointed; it was a head that didn't seem to require the short and sturdy neck on which it stood. He had a round pink face and a small, grey brush of a moustache which sat on top of a small mouth, a mouth which generally had a smile lurking, as did his eyes. He had a way of looking at passers-by which was both a challenge and an invitation but not many walkers stopped to talk. He liked to talk though, especially if the questions were about the garden. He told me that he bought seed potatoes at the market and he ran through for me his many uses for the huge perennial lovage plant that shot up every spring and continued growing until it became tough and rank and had to be cut back. In the spring I used to harvest a bit of that lovage for my lunch salads, reveling in the strong celery taste that persisted through the after-noon.

When I first began to watch for Harold's garden to emerge in the spring, it was evident that he was more than up to the effort involved. Once the rows were planted, he used a basic Dutch hoe to keep the weeds down. The orange plastic fencing he erected around the garden, no doubt to signify that it was not open to all-comers, was always neat and taut. And, perhaps to protect against vandalism or perhaps from a sense of community, he always planted something outside the fence, zucchini squash maybe, or bush beans, to be picked by passers-by.

As the summer progressed, Harold's garden was a glorious thing and, more likely than not, you could find Harold planted in the middle of it, surveying his handiwork while sitting on the battered old kitchen chair that served as his throne. King of his garden.

The years passed; I could see that Harold was having trouble keeping down the weeds. The fence began to slip and sag in spots and the pile of rusty tools and junk at the back of the garden seemed to grow and get more junky-looking. I decided to put an idea to him, thinking hard about how to phrase it. The idea concerned a friend of mine, a former farmer, who was not satisfied with his postage-stamp-sized plot in the community garden in Oliver.

“I have a friend,” I said to Harold one day, “who is looking for a place to garden. He has some experience. Maybe you’d like to talk to him some-time.” “Send him round,” said Harold, and the next thing I knew Harold and Don had restored the garden to its former glory.

For a few years, Harold and Don gardened together, with Harold doing less and less while Don did more and more. When Harold was sick, Don went to visit him in his apartment, which apparently was not a desirable place to be, and when Harold went to the hospital to have a leg amputated, Don continued to visit.

I am not sure exactly when Harold died. I saw him out in the neighbourhood a few times, gamely wheeling himself around in his wheelchair. Occasionally he could be sited surveying his garden from the sidelines, down near the back where the junk was piled up. Not long after Harold disappeared so did Don, but in Don’s case it was a move to another town. In Harold’s, it was a move to eternity.

Miraculously, Harold’s garden was still there more than twenty years after I first saw him there; it was as though “garden” was built into the DNA of the soil. In 2020, the gardeners were young. “Some of us live in these houses,” one of the young gardeners told me, gesturing towards the three stalwarts. These eager young gardeners had built boxes and raised beds and the junk pile at the back had pretty well disappeared. They hadn’t killed off the lovage though, and by the middle of May 2020 it was easy to lean over the plastic fence to pinch a bit for a lunchtime salad. (Kathryn Isabel Chase Merrett ©. Ed. RJM)