

*And for some part of that day in June,
I asked myself, "Why? Why would
I want to have hundreds of strangers
clumping through my garden?"*

The Accidental

Tour Guide

by Maxine Paetro



Maxine hosts a garden tour for the Garden Conservancy's Open Days Program at her garden, Broccoli Hall.
Photo by Linda R. Chen

I found my house on a rutted dirt road outside a small rural town. It wasn't much of a house, but I didn't care. It was framed by huge, old spruce trees and the barren acre-and-a-half lot tilted south and west, making it a totally perfect, sun-filled plot for roses.

I had long dreamed of having an English-style garden — a series of garden rooms differing in mood and floral content; perennial beds rich with color, a rose border, a pond, and wrap-around porches and decks so I could view the garden from all sides.

For years, I soaked up everything I could from reading garden books and walking many, many miles through noteworthy English gardens with a little yellow guidebook in hand. I had experienced great frustration in two previous homes that had gardens in the shade, but when I found my house, in 1985, I knew I had come home.

I slapped my deposit down so fast the broker almost forgot to say, "Don't you want to see the inside of the house?"

I didn't. For me, it was all about the garden.

My mind was flooded with plans that I quickly shared with Tim Steinhoff, a wonderful horticulturist, who signed on for the job of turning hardpan into a garden.

Together, we went straight to work, undaunted by snow and flood, an absence of topsoil, and heaps of construction materials in the middle of the yard.

Ten years passed.

I indulged all of my fantasies for sunny borders — billowing shrub roses and peonies and catmint punctuated with dark purple tall bearded irises and I cultivated shade gardens, too.

But one of my gardens was almost part of my house. It was a courtyard made with weathered bricks, laid in sand, and tucked into the ell formed by the back porch and the garage. This new space was forty feet square and inside its boundaries, were two long beds, six parterres and a small, centered fountain fitted with a submersible pump that sent water spilling over an old millwheel.

Old French roses were planted in the beds, and woody herbs -- lavender, teucrium and santolina, took their places in the parterres. When finished, the courtyard was a sweet-smelling and satisfying outdoor room.

My dream garden was featured in a national magazine, and then, almost without warning, it became a stop on a garden tour.

I agreed to let a friend bring her garden club of thirty-five ladies to see the garden -- but I hadn't heard the number correctly.

I stood in the courtyard, my jaw hanging open, my eyes wide with disbelief as three hundred-and-fifty garden club members traveled every inch of my little garden, heaping me with praise as they passed.

That day, my garden perspective changed.

I hadn't imagined a scene like this during the ten years of designing the beds and pulling the weeds and rectifying huge mistakes and glorying in horticultural surprises. And for some part of that day in June, I asked myself, "Why? Why would I want to have hundreds of strangers clumping through my garden?"

By noon, I knew.

I realized that I had a garden that was actually good enough to share. I was having fun, meeting others who were as obsessed with gardening as I was, and I was sorry when the day ended, and the gates were closed. Soon afterwards, I was invited to participate in the first Garden Conservancy Open Days Tour.

Yes! I would do it. Absolutely.

But, I had to make the garden good enough for a public showing. I called Tim and together we designed two new gardens, and when the first Open Day arrived, I was waiting at the gate to greet my fellow gardeners with their yellow guidebooks in hand.

I remember one gentleman in particular. I met him in the courtyard. He said to me, "Being here is like living a Beatles song."

Which one?

"I Am the Walrus. Sitting in an English garden waiting for the sun."

It has been fifteen years since the first garden club came to Broccoli Hall. I still enjoy my private garden time as much as before, but I have more focus and a higher standard of excellence now.

I have learned from my visitors, and because of them, I have polished and added to my original concepts.

I am thankful for having met those gardeners and glad, too, that I've inspired ideas that my guests have used in their own gardens.

Also, I must admit, I love the applause.



Maxine Paetro co-writes with author, James Patterson. Their two recent collaborations, "8th Confession" and "Swinsuit" are both NY Times best-sellers. See more of her Amenia garden, Broccoli Hall, at BroccoliHall.com.