

PARSLEY IN A SHOE

Mary Fulton had a very unusual garden. Perhaps it is because Mary Fulton was a very unusual person. Having grown up on a family farm with many of her early years barely rising to the level of lean, she gained a certain wisdom that many today could surely use.

Today, we live in such times where the packaging of the products we buy is often three-times bigger than what's inside. At least we have figured out how to recycle some of it. But, alas, when the product stops working a year later, we add it to the heaping mound at the landfill. Ask any of the other farmers around Mary's home place, "Where's the nearest landfill?" and you'd get an answer of, "What's a landfill?". Okay, maybe that's an exaggeration. To be fair, there were a few things that Mary had to throw away, but most came back as compost.

As you strolled through Mary's garden, you began to realize that you were walking through an outdoor art gallery and a garden. She never set out any particular design. It just grew and grew by the simple fact that she couldn't find it in herself to part

with much of anything. An old tractor wheel served nicely as a frame for storing a garden hose. That same old tractor provided a seat for weeding and planting. In fact, just about the entire tractor, except for the engine that she sold to a tractor scrapyards, now lived in Mary's garden.

On a bench of a simple potting shed, you'd find an old coffee pot continuing life as a storage container for coffee grounds destined for compost. When an old garden hose got too many leaks, Mary cut it up into small sections for staking and wiring new fruit trees that needed support. Used burlap feed sacks held many a harvest of apples, and when they eventually wore out, she would cut them into smaller pieces and use them around new tomato plants to ward off cutworms. A broken dish would be smashed into smaller pieces and used in the bottom of a pot to help with drainage.

The land in the farming area where Mary lived had, understatedly, many rocks to harvest. She took every rock she encountered in her digging and put it onto a huge rock pile at the corner of her property. When the season's rains had sufficiently cleaned the rocks, she found many uses for the clean rocks. She probably had enough she could have opened a rock business had there been any

demand for them. She fashioned a mold from an old tractor mounted seeder and made decorative planter boxes with the smaller rocks cemented on the sides. Larger rocks transformed into whimsical garden figures.

Speaking of planters, an eclectic array of worn-out items from house and field found a second or perhaps, third or fourth life as a planter. When a neighbor had a piece of “junk”, they would bring it over to Mary and she would find an empty spot and put it in. Maybe a sophisticated cosmopolitan art dealer would consider it all junk, but not Mary and certainly not anyone who really took the time to become fascinated with it. Admittedly, though, most everything was junk, but it never looked like a junkyard. The garden was clean and neat, and the junk looked like it belonged. She could tell you a story for almost everything in her garden.

One day, Mary fell ill and could not tend to her garden for over a month. Her neighbors and friends at church kept the garden from becoming too overgrown. One of those who missed Mary dearly was old Sam Turner, Lance County’s premier junk dealer. As a regular customer of Larry’s Junk Boutique, which Mary patronized when she

needed something really unusual, they developed a good relationship with each other. Rumor always had it that Sam might ask her to marry him one day, but nothing came of it. Sam's discounted price to his best customer always seemed unusually steep for such an experienced and savvy businessman, even though he advertised "Quality Junk at a Quality Price". When Mary got well enough to continue working her garden museum, old Sam had a month's worth of personally selected specimen junk delivered to her farm. Old Sam and his delivery helpers even stayed for the rest of the day and helped her get caught up on her gardening, which the rumormongers consumed as more fodder.

Someone once asked Mary why she did it. She said it was the only way she knew. Growing up poor on an old farm in the Depression era, her mom gleaned many survival instincts from the fields of necessity. And she passed those instincts on to her daughter.

When I first visited Mary's farm out on Farm Road C, I immediately became fascinated by everything I saw. In a simpler way, her ingenuity rivaled Leonardo da Vinci. I revisited Mary's garden every year for ten straight years. My eleventh visit stood differently. The harvest bins were empty, for

unbeknownst to me, she had passed away two months earlier.

The county commission talked about buying Mary's farm from the estate and turning it into a recreation area, but it never came to be. Perhaps no one remained who had the heart and mind to see such a project through—I don't know.

On the tenth and last visit that I saw Mary, she left me with a parting gift, as she did every time. As I opened the car door to leave, she came running out and handed me an old shoe that overflowed with a parsley plant. I still have that old shoe, but with time and the elements, it has started to deteriorate. I replant it every year with a new parsley plant. I'm sure there will come a time when it can no longer serve as a planter, but maybe then I will bag it up and put it in the old chest in the attic.

As the years go by, I think about family and friends who have passed away. Some of the things that make you remember them seem odd at times. There is certainly none odder than parsley in a shoe.