

I just want to be with the flowers

Ever since I was a little girl I just wanted to be with the flowers. My mom always liked to plant flowers in the yard. There were marigolds and zinnia, roses, daffodils, lily of the valley, and exotic things called poppies. Like any child I didn't know what their names were but knew I loved them.

When I moved into my first house as a new mother, I planted seeds – marigolds – in a little rectangular area just outside the front door. But the result was somewhat disappointing with a few scraggly sprouts and maybe one or two orange bed-headed flowers. I asked my mom what happened and she said; “Well... maybe if you take some of that gravel out and add dirt, and try watering them once in while...they might do better.”

At my next house, with baby number two, I ordered two hundred tulip bulbs. I dug up a sixty foot long trench along side the busy thoroughfare we lived on. The following spring was a glorious riot of alternating yellow, red, and orange. That house was an old three story farm house. From the kitchen I would go out the back door to a wide concrete walkway that led to the separate garage. The walkway was covered by a trellis and in turn the trellis was covered by some kind of leaves and



branches. Like the house the trellis was old but not rickety. That trellis had legs, tree trunk legs. Over the

years the tree legs had hugged the supporting wood posts, grown around them and were now pulling the posts out of the ground by their twisting forces. In



spring came waterfalls of purple flowers cascading down for the bees who loved them. I loved them too, and asked my mother what are these things. “Oh that's wisteria.” She breathed in... “Wisteria smells so sweet.”

At my present home, even though my three sons are men and on their own for years, the nest is not empty. I have marigolds, and tulips and wisteria, and new additions every year. I told my man kids, they owe me nine months of labor, each. My youngest has made the most progress in reimbursing me. Three weekends straight he dug through dirt, and clay and gravel. He trenched out and cordoned off twenty-five feet of prime real estate just outside my front door, for a bamboo garden. His next older brother built me a cutting garden. It went in where decades past, vegetables grew. He took out all the weeds, added a weed barrier, and mulched around the red twig dogwood, French and black pussy willow, prunus and smoke bush, spirea, azalea, and other inspiring ikebana material. He built a new border around the garden, wood timbers alternating with concrete crescent designs, resembling Japanese crests, and four dragonfly corners. Anytime he happens by the cutting garden, he stops to pull out any renegade weed that sneaked past his barrier. My oldest built me a fountain, small pond actually, in the planter outside my kitchen doors in full view of morning coffee drinking. Last summer I planted a lotus root in that fountain. It looked good for a while but then appeared it would not survive, so I got another one. The second lotus did much better, and like a friend rooting you on when your down, the first lotus came back. By the end of summer both were prolifically generating aerial leaves, but no flowers. I wasn't worried about it. I had become more experienced and patient in gardening and knew from research this was the norm. I also knew that I had to protect them from

freezing. So late last fall I covered the fountain with two layers of bamboo poles and placed a round glass table top from an old patio table on top of that. Then came bags of packing peanuts for insulation, all covered with plastic sheets, all held down by bricks. There was an early frost that made me nervous, so I added a bird bath heater for redundancy. I was rewarded this spring with both roots sending out coin leaves and then ariel leaves and I am hoping they will flower this season.

A couple of weeks ago I went to Nashville for the South Five Ikenobo Chapter Special Visiting

Professor workshops. I go every June. This year will be the last time for Nashville. My good friend and South Five president, Betty, is moving to Illinois.



Instead of six car hours of separation, we are talking five minutes. I am so happy and excited that this is happening, but the fun times we have had over the years in Nashville makes it bittersweet. Just a few years ago my mom rode down and back with me to Betty's house. She wanted to visit a friend of hers who lived in Tennessee. It wasn't the first time we had been on a road trip together. When Nobu Kurashige, the first lady visiting professor came to America to teach, I traveled to as many places as I could taking lessons from her. My husband accused me of stalking Kurashige sensei and sensei herself named me her *borrowed student*. As I studied the schedule in the teachers book, I saw there were three workshops in Florida; Suncoast Chapter, Naples, and the South Florida Chapter, and lucky me, my mother lived in Florida at the time. I flew down to Tampa where my mom picked me up at the airport. We traveled from one Ikenobo event to another, enjoying Ikenobo exhibitions, demonstrations, workshops, and time together. We were even invited to dinner at Mrs. Lefcourte's along with Kurashige sensei and another mother and

daughter from the New York area. Mom drank Japanese beer, ate Japanese food and used chopsticks for the first time in her life. On my drive down to Nashville I was thinking about my road trips with mom. I remember stopping at an Illinois rest stop where mother pointed at some beautiful blooming shrubbery. "Isn't that pretty. I wonder what it is." Without hesitation I stated "That's cranberry viburnum." "Really?" She asked me with a credulous eyebrow and amused face, as if I was pulling her leg. "Yes really... and I knooooow because when Mary Jo and I used to go walking we always saw this stand of bushes which were super healthy and get really pretty berries in the fall... so we looked it up and found out that they were cranberry viburnum... and Mary Jo even planted a whole row in her yard" *so there!* I felt like I had to explain myself. My mom backed up a half a step, smiled and said "OK. If you say so."

Workshops in Nashville were great. I had cut cattails, and iris leaves and hosta, Japanese spirea, maple and smoke bush and what seemed like half the neighborhoods flora to bring with me. Betty's friend Mary had cut blue, pink, and purple hydrangea, trumpet vine, and wild flowers. Kesami-san from Chattanooga brought roses and nandina, variegated euonymus and



more. For the last time I cut striped eualia, magnolia, and aucuba from 1010 Grassland Lane. Even with all the cut material, we decided we should make one run to the wholesaler. I found the most beautiful agapanthus waiting for me there and used it for shu in my shimputai rikka the next day.



My Nashville Ikenobo Sisters and me

At the end of the first day of workshops I noticed I had a message on my cell phone. It was the nursing home. They wanted to let me know that mother had stopped eating and drinking. "Actively dying" is what they called it. I knew that. She had been working on it for quite a while now. But what I didn't know is what am I supposed to do now. Who is going to tell me.

One by one and together my Ikenobo sisters surrounded me. They told me their stories, gave me their strength, their shoulders, their love. In her best *Southern Way* Betty explained that she needed to get to Illinois so if it was all right could she ride back with me. We took off next day afternoon, me driving, but too soon I was exhausted and Betty took over. Six hours by car. Six hours to rest and be restless, think and feel, remember and wonder what will be and what won't be when I get home.

I finally did fall asleep and when I woke up the sun was setting. It was a Midwest sunset; just enough scattered clouds in the otherwise clear blue sky, making it clear to foreigners why people live in Illinois. Soon the sun was below the horizon and I felt as if we were riding along in a shallow bowl, its rim a soft glowing pink. Betty was concentrating on driving and there was some mellow something playing on the radio. All around me were fields of soybeans and corn in ordered rows.

I breathed in... and smelled *home*, as the "Champaign County" marker sped past us. Twenty minutes out. I'm close. The moon appeared in front of us, high in the sky, a waxing crescent moon, surrounded by stars. Twilight. I breathed out ...and felt a twinge. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a Kleenex to wipe the wetness off my face. I wasn't crying.

After I dropped off Betty, I got the call. Twenty minutes ago, would you like to come by, I don't know.



In the morning I took my coffee on the back steps enjoying another beautiful day with lotus leaves. I grabbed the bottle of plant tablets and gently pushed one in near one of the roots, and then went around to the other side of the planter to find a place near the other root. The leaves were in the way and I didn't want to hurt them so I carefully pushed them aside, and there she was, my first lotus bud.

