

# Annuals

William Vernon



*I know she likes to watch me out here on my knees, weeding the flowers, keeping the edges of the beds in good shape. Every now and then when she waves to me like that, I know there's nothing more important than planting flowers in our yard.*

**W**EEDING BEGONIAS, I WAVE A dirty palm at Ruth in her chair on the porch. She smiles, maybe remembering how I used to tell her, "I'll never be a slave to a yard."

That was before we were married. We'd drive around dreaming about our future lives together, checking for sale signs. When I'd notice residents outside edging or mowing, they'd prompt me to say something like, "People spend hours working on their yard. Don't they have anything better to do?"

Ruth would say, "I think it's nice. The flowers are pretty."

I didn't argue, but I was ambitious, young, feeling pressure to succeed in the insurance game. My concern was making a living. Not whether a yard was pretty.

Ruth never questioned my attitude. She just ignored it and did her own thing. She taught middle-school children for thirty four years, and during that time, after we bought our house, she planted flowers around it herself. Insisted on having flowers. Okay by me, but I planned to do just enough yard work to avoid complaints from the neighbors. I mowed, trimmed hedges and trees. That satisfied my impulse for gardening.

My attitude created some conflict. When she'd ask me to spade up the earth for her planting, I'd complain. When I'd vent, she herself would start digging. I'd become ashamed, then insist on doing it myself. After a few years, as soon as her car showed up with hundreds of flowers, I dug up the ground without being asked.

I did stop her cold about fertilizers and pesticides. My logic was that they poisoned the land and killed its animal life, including worms. Plus they poisoned the water and air. Our lawn became an oasis of dandelions

among the green desert of chemically-treated suburbs. She was never happy about this, but she had environmental scruples enough to agree with me in principle.

We also disagreed about watering the yard. I called it a waste and unnatural. Grass protects itself by browning up in drought. Comes back when it rains. She finally went along with that when she over-watered one year and killed the grass. A lawn guy told me not to water in the evenings as she had done. But I withheld that info from Ruth to get my way again. That's about the only time I hid the truth from her.

Now, as they say, times have changed. Imagine coming in exhausted from work one evening and finding the one you love unconscious beside the wheelbarrow in the backyard surrounded by eight bags of topsoil and ten flats of flowers, all of which she had apparently unloaded herself. It was spring, the world looked beautiful, and there she lay.

I nearly panicked. Maybe worse than that, I sank into what I'd call despair. While she was under the hospital sheets, nearly comatose, shrunken and weak, unable to talk, I cursed justice. I cursed God. I thought I'd lost her.

"She was retiring in June," I told Dr. Stein as he bent over Ruth, checking her optic responses. "Thirty-some years of teaching brats and putting up with parents. Thirty years of working toward retirement, then this. I can't believe it!"

"Ruth is improving." He patted my arm. "Hang in there."

After a week in a rehabilitation facility, he helped me wheel her out to the car, lift her up, and strap her into the front seat, helped me fold up and put her new chair in the trunk. Then he said, "She'll improve some, but don't expect too much."

I shook his hand. "Thank you."

"Want some more advice?" He looked me in the eyes. "Complaining and dwelling on what you and she are missing helps no one, least of all Ruth." He held his hands up, palms toward me. "I know that's easy for me to say, not having a wife in this situation. But isn't being positive more beneficial than being negative? Ruth deserves help in raising her spirits. Think about it and remember that support group I told you about."

Be positive? I was angry at his interfering and barely able to speak while going home, retrieving the chair, setting it up, lifting Ruth out of the car onto it.

When I headed for the new ramp I'd built to the front door, she grunted, shook her head, and grunted again. Somehow I knew she wanted to go into the backyard first. So I took her there, right to where I'd found her lying on the ground.

The place lay in deep shadow. Thinking how tragic everything was, I stood behind her and let her look.

She made a sound so I came around in front of her. She was crying. The first tears she'd made since the stroke. She shook her head, moved her right hand, gripped my shirtsleeve, and tried to say something.

That made me look around with her eyes. The flats of flowers she'd bought were in bad shape. We'd had some rain or else they'd have all been dead. I took the hose, watered them, and Ruth's eyes lit up.

I patted her hand. "Sorry I forgot about them. I'll put them in the ground this afternoon."

Which I did, and she was there, watching me the whole time.

The flower jobs became mine after that. I knew they pleased her. They got her outside. They put color into her life and, I'll admit it, into mine.

Four years later, Ruth's habit is to sit on the porch and watch me do lawn work. When it comes to buying and planting the flowers, she helps. I wheel her around, and she picks out what she likes. Back home with them, she manages to indicate that she wants the orange impatiens along the front of the house to match the cushions of our outdoor chairs. I wheel her out by the beds so she can watch me plant the stuff up close. Occasionally, she suggests something by pointing and nodding and making a noise, like go deeper or don't cover with so much dirt, and I do it.

Otherwise the work and the decisions are up to me, and I've grown particular. Two years ago I told her no more pansies around the big pine. Pansies don't last in hot weather. They die and then we have bare spots where they were. This year it's red impatiens on the outer ring around the pine tree. White begonias on the center ring. And nearest the trunk, tall snapdragons, which I use for bouquets on the kitchen table.

Everything freshly planted gets Miracle Grow once a week for the first month, heavy watering every second or third day. Still no chemicals on the grass.

I sold the agency to be home with Ruth all the time. She has a lot more reason for being negative than I have, but she's not.

Some evenings, we sit on the porch and watch the day's final flashing of the blooms. We hold hands. I talk, and she grunts and coos and aahs. On her good days, we eat dinner outside with the beauty surrounding us.

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