



The Intimate Garden

by Col. Michael M. Conrad

I was 55 when I retired from the United States Air Force. With the help of many members of the San Antonio Daylily Society I started growing daylilies. Being young and sprightly I built large daylily beds of various designs with pathways, statues, and sundials. These were very pretty but as I aged, these big beds became difficult to work and still are. Thank goodness, I am fortunate enough to have some help. After I turned 65, all new daylily beds were built no wider than six feet. The beds are of various lengths, some curved, and all raised a foot above ground level. I could sit anywhere along the length of these skinny beds, either side, and reach in three feet to do whatever needed to be done. This arrangement worked well for me until I became an octogenarian. Infirmities crept up on me as they seem to do to most of us that live long enough. What gardening I did do was supervisory and not very gratifying.

The devastating drought of 2000 hit south Texas as a dome of high pressure hung over us day after day and the temperature rose as high as 111 degrees. The Edward's Aquifer shrank rapidly. This is the only source of potable water for San Antonio and

the surrounding area. Many watering restrictions were imposed by the various agencies and authorities. The price of water went up which was also a deterrent. My August water bill was \$1300 and that was comparatively low. It was obvious that large St. Augustine lawns were no longer tenable. Large scale gardens, even with built in drip systems, were about to be a thing of the past. Faced with these dismal facts and knowing that the situation would only worsen as San Antonio continues to grow, I started looking for alternative ways to satisfy my gardening addiction.

Y2K, remember Y2K? This was an exercise in preparedness which is something that we should think about more than we do. "Be prepared" is the Boy Scouts' solemn creed. I had some barrels in which we stored Y2K water. Since these were excess to our immediate need, we sawed these plastic 55 gallon syrup barrels in half, drilled drainage holes in the bottoms, connected all half barrels to one water source with a check valve and PVC pipe, filled them with dirt, and planted 200 daylilies. I have a presentation on how we put this project together - how, what, where, and when with illustrations if anyone is interested.

I started out with this barrel project to save water and money, enough so that I could continue to grow a thousand or so cultivars. As the first 200 daylilies planted in the barrels began to flourish and bloom this past April-June, the project became more than a water conservation exercise. I recognized the value this garden concept could be for the handicapped. It is exciting to know that for not much money, \$25 or less, anyone in a wheelchair or a scooter could have a two barrel kitchen or flower garden. This concept could be expanded. Our garden is under construction for a total of 275 barrels.

I am nearly 84 years old and I have all sorts of maladies that seem to accompany aging. It certainly is true that youth is wasted on the young. One of my problems is not being able to walk very well. I ride a scooter in and

out of the house. I ride this thing everywhere - in the grocery store, doctor's office, or it occurred to me the other day, to my barrel gardens. I scooter out among my barrels and never have I been more intimate with my plants. It is a totally new experience and one that I believe more handicapped people might consider.

Years ago my wife and I were visiting the Melon Art Gallery in Washington. As we went from one exhibit to another we noticed an attractive young woman in a wheel chair looking at the various exhibits. As we were leaving the museum this young woman rolled up to the front desk, stood up, and said to the attendant "thank you very much" and walked out. We commented at the time, "What a way to study paintings." Well, what a way to garden! I can hardly wait to get out among and between my barrels every day, rain or shine.

A few weeks ago, as I was scooting about the garden it hit me, this concept of gardening should and could be for any gardener, particularly a new daylily gardener. There are many hypotheses on container gardening but I have not seen any that takes advantage of the plastic barrels available any place soft drink syrup is shipped.

I have experienced an intimacy with my plants that I have never had before. This relationship began with close observation and inspection of each plant, every day. Soon, I realized it was more than inspection, it was the pure pleasure of visiting old friends on such an intimate basis.

I was stationed in Washington, D.C., some years ago without my loved ones and no pets. It was a dreary time. I started a sweet potato growing in a vase of water and gravel. I talked to that sweet potato every day. The only trouble was the darn plant talked back and never shut-up! I think this new intimacy is better.

So! There you have it. The philosophy of the intimate garden.

