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# Betty's Victory Garden



**For Oklahoman Betty Burns, her flourishing garden symbolizes a personal victory over a devastating heart attack.**

BY DEBORAH HUFFORD

Today, twelve years after a heart attack almost killed her, Betty Burns of Norman, Oklahoma, draws new life from her garden and gives it back again in ample doses.

Amid her garden paradise, she stops to cup a huge fuchsia-colored blossom in her hands, or nods to a hummingbird hovering over delicate Cleome blossoms. She is gregarious and spunky and hardworking. No one would guess she had once looked death straight in the face.

But Betty defied the odds and proved she had more heart than her cardiograms showed. The struggle was not easy. Pain, weakness, and fatigue constantly beat her down. "Out of sheer will and stubbornness, she recovered," says her husband, Ken, but it took four long years.

After her heart attack, Betty retired from her X-ray technician career of 27 years, but she still wanted a source of retirement income. Then she had an idea that would change the very texture of her life. She had read of large estates, years ago, that had flower gardens just for cutting bouquets, and she thought the idea would work as a business. The notion of having a mom-and-pop operation had always appealed to her.

She decided to transform her backyard—nearly an acre of velvety green Bermuda grass lawn—into a paradise of flowers and herbs. She would call it a cutting garden, where people could pay to cut their own flowers or herbs. Ken called it "crazy." Nevertheless, he helped her do research, select hundreds of seeds from catalogs, and buy equipment. Killing off the whole backyard—"the nicest patch of Bermuda grass in Oklahoma—was the point of no return," Ken says. "That was when we bit the bullet."

Today, in place of the Bermuda grass, the sweet scents and colors of more than 300 types of flowers and 30 kinds of herbs intermingle into a floral pastiche of nature's poetry. There is a lily pond full of goldfish gliding amid the water





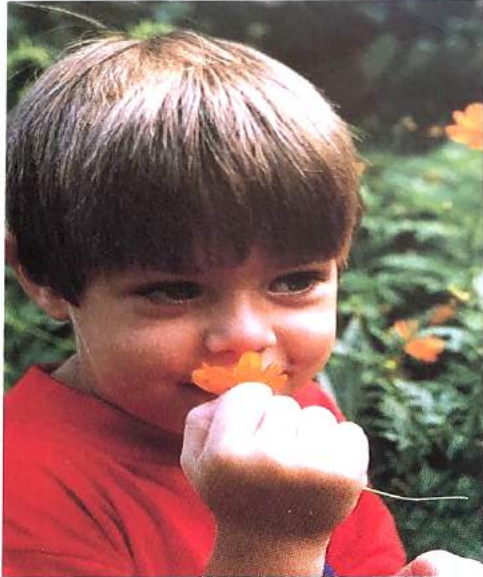
**Above:** Betty and Ken Burns transformed an acre of grass into a cutting garden business. **Opposite left:** Their granddaughters, Erin and Janna, admire daisies and plumed Celosia. **Right:** Transactions take place at Betty's garden "office"—a homemade gazebo. The grandchildren had a "Huck Finn session," Ken says, to paint the garden's picket fence.



Photographs: Bob Hawks



# Betty's Victory Garden



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grass and purple and pink water hyacinths. The morning air is filled with a symphony of bird songs: mockingbirds, mourning doves, whippoorwills, and chickadees. Occasionally, the hollow echoes of a confused woodpecker drilling on an old metal water tank reverberate amid the orchard trees. Always there are the hummingbirds making airy visits to sumptuous blossoms.

Poetry sings in the names of the trees and plants too: sassafras, juu-jube, eucalyptus, plumed Celosia, and velvet-soft lamb's ear. One plant bearing long, pendulous blooms is called Kiss Me Over the Garden Gate.

Betty started a miniature garden for children because, she says, “they can learn a great deal about what the earth gives us. Everyone in their lives has a chance to pass on something good to the next generation. This is our chance to teach children about the preciousness of life.”

Betty cites the example of the bumblebee. Many children are afraid of bees because they sting, “but if a child can see how the bee probes and pollinates a flower, that child begins to understand that the bee is beautiful and important in Nature,” she says.

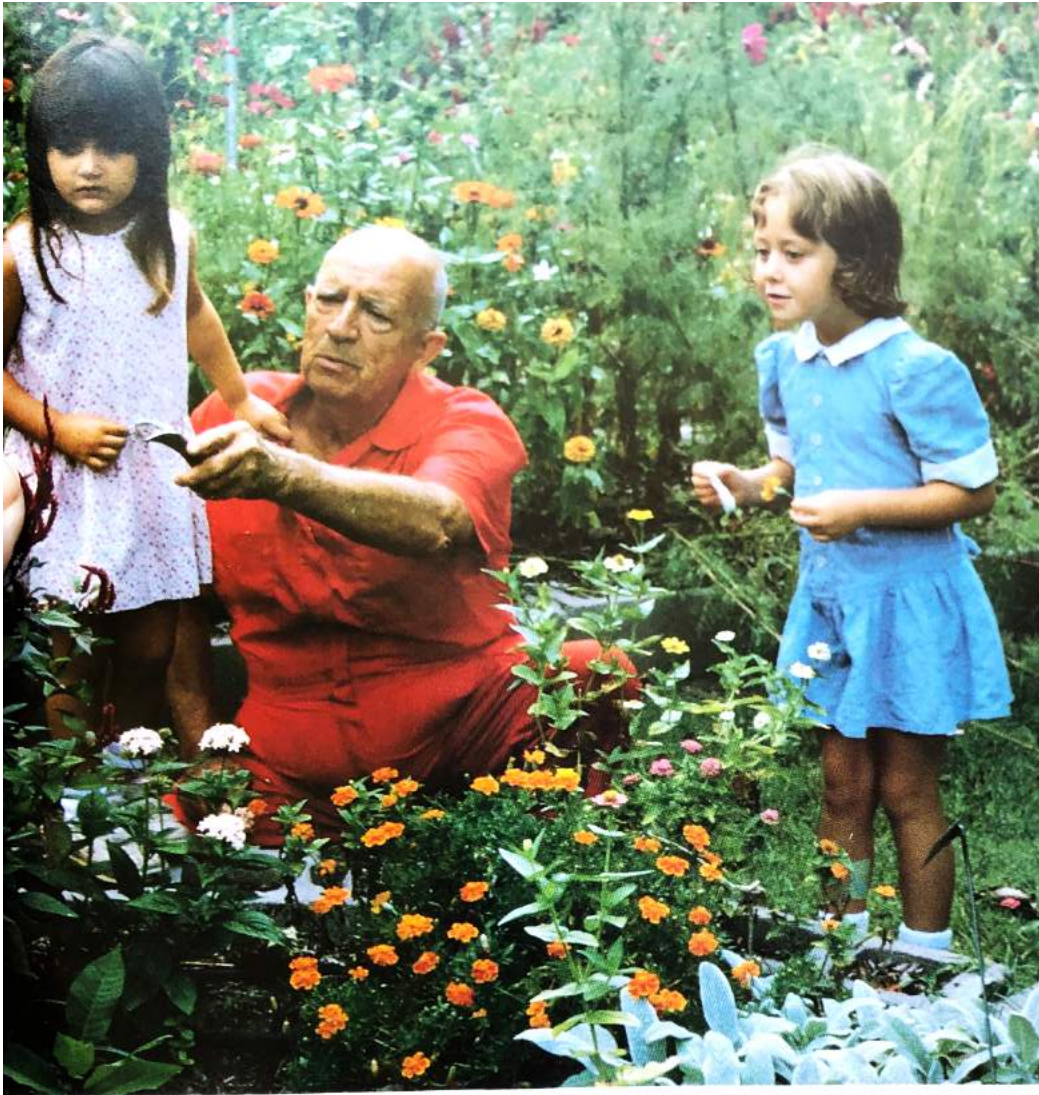
Betty has built a new career and a new life around her garden. Since she's opened the business, she's met many people in different walks of life.

Her customers range from preschool children to retirees to some of the best chefs and restaurateurs in the state, who flock to her garden for a source of fresh herbs. The garden also serves as a peaceful enclave for visitors. Students from nearby University of Oklahoma come to the garden to eat their sack lunches on the stone benches and study. One visitor, who was planning for the blind, came to Betty for advice on the most aromatic flowers and herbs.

The garden has given her a chance to teach, to share, to make new friends, and, perhaps, most importantly, has given her a new purpose in her retirement. Since opening her cutting garden, she has given lectures on herb gardening for the state's Master Gardener program and has also started work as a landscape consultant. Her plan, at Ken's prodding, is to write a book about growing a cutting







*Left:* Ken Burns plucks a velvet-soft lamb's ear for two little visitors to touch. "The garden is a great feast of sensations. After a rain, its sweet-smelling aromas waft throughout the neighborhood," Betty says. *Below:* A neighborhood dad shares his son's fascination. "Children view the world with such wonder," Betty says, and she and Ken always indulge their curiosity, encouraging them to touch and smell the flowers and herbs.





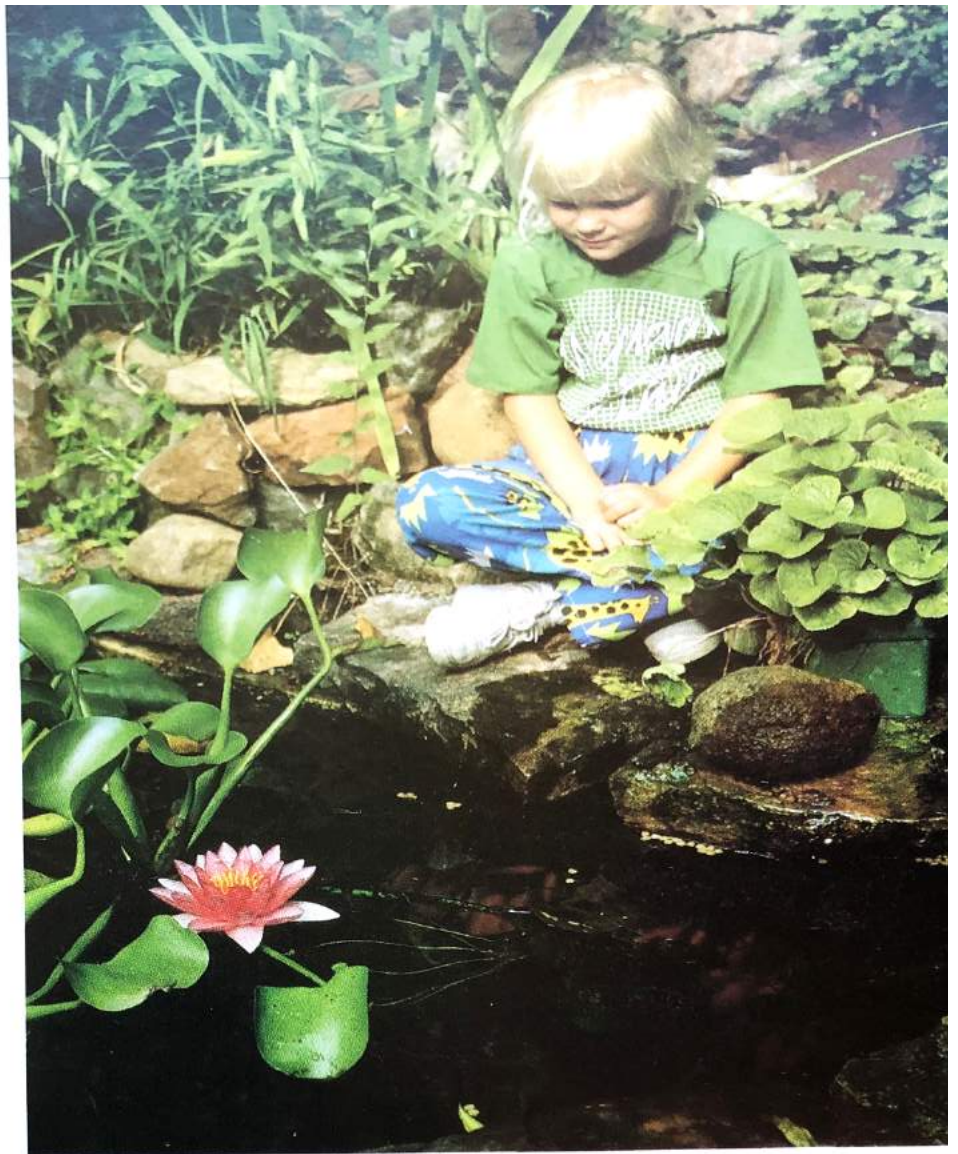
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working in the soil and growing things, she says.” Adds Ken, “We consider that putting a seed in the earth and watching it grow into something beautiful is a miracle.”

It is not the only miracle Betty and Ken witness each day. Betty’s recovery has proven what determination can overcome, and her garden is a sweet testament of that victory. Now, when she’s not working, she watches butterflies or sits under the swaying branches of a huge, grandfatherly cottonwood tree that sings in the morning wind. □



garden because, she says, there is no literature on the subject.

“I wish I were about six people. There are so many things I want to accomplish. I don’t understand people who retire and have nothing to do,” Betty says. Now she works hard, but she has made a mental gear change. Her garden work is therapeutic. “There’s something spiritual about

**Above:** A neighborhood girl peers into the lily pond where goldfish hide from her under water hyacinths. **Top left:** Sitting on the windowsill of the gazebo are corked bottles of homemade vinaigrette created from Betty’s herb garden. **Bottom left:** Betty also sells dried flowers and vine wreaths that hang on the gazebo walls.