

HEAVEN HAS BEEN LOCATED

I always knew Heaven would involve lilacs, but I thought it was located much farther than six miles away from my front porch. A short drive down Issac Frye Highway to Bennington Battle Trail places me at the gates of Stepping Stones Bed & Breakfast, and the nearly two solid acres of perennial gardens that surround it are the closest thing to paradise I've ever seen.

The owner of Stepping Stones, Ann Carlsmith, began to create this enchanting place in the late 1970's when she turned the first spadefuls of dusty sod that made up the backyard into rich, soft-edged beds of peonies and sweet woodruff, Hinoke cypress and Japanese painted fern, dwarf blue phlox and apricot-colored columbine. Now, loose stone paths lead you through lilac, azalea, magnolia, rhododendron and profuse blooming ground cover, through antique wrought iron gates and up petal-covered granite steps to one of several outdoor seating areas made up of fragrance, color, peace and quiet.

The gardens are in continuous bloom from April to September, and Ann is in continuous motion to insure a season-long horticultural spectacle for her guests. Ann's passion for gardening began in her native Washington state with inspiration from her mother, an avid gardener, and continued with a certificate for completed study in landscape design from Radcliffe in 1985. Her gardening prowess is legendary in these parts, and many homeowners with an eye toward landscaping visit Ann's garden on a regular basis for inspiration and professional consultation. She has created a place so beautiful that it would be almost cruel not to share it, but she shares it quite generously with a genuine warmth, humor, and well-earned pride. On one recent visit, I was so preoccupied with the beauty of the gardens around me that I neglected to properly introduce my friend to Ann. This is a place where you might find yourself saying, as you slip further and further into profound relaxation, "This is my friend, Peony... I mean... Penny."

The first thing that strikes me about Stepping Stones is its absolute lack of stuffiness. The skylit dining room is a welcoming mix of potted bougainvillea and lounging cats. The larger of the two cats, whose name was recently changed from Vivacci (Italian for "vivacious") to Largo (for his increasing sloth), could easily be mistaken for an angora pillow, so check before you sit. The smaller of the two, Thumbelina, can inspire you with just one slow-motion blink to curl up and

enjoy your first decent nap in months. If you prefer more energetic animal companionship, a five-year-old German Shepherd named Constanza (after Mozart's wife) will lead you with enthusiasm to all the best squirrel-watching spots in the garden.

The kitchen is the center of almost as much activity as the garden for Ann. Guests often rise to the smell of hot-from-the-iron Belgian waffles and fresh fruit or berry-laden muffins served with homemade preserves. The guest rooms are light, airy and spotless, furnished with nostalgic collectibles and more often than not, a garden motif. The walls are decorated with prints done by artist friends. The whole place brings up the feeling of being young and barefoot in summer.

Colors from the garden outside are recreated inside, in the form of baskets overflowing with yarns of muted hues and the resulting gorgeous woven blankets made by Ann when the garden is under snow. Luckily, these blankets are available for purchase by guests who can't bear to leave without something soothing to cling to as they head back to their considerably more stressful urban environs.

Even though I live only six miles away, it's almost painful for me to pull out of Ann's driveway and head back to my own yard, barren by comparison to the paradise I've just visited. Then I look at the sod and I look at my spade, and for a moment, I see the possibility of a Heaven sequel. The sequels are never as good as the original, though, and right now I have energy equal to that of Largo's, so Heaven will officially remain at the end of Bennington Battle Trail, in the capable hands of Ann Carlsmith.

Stepping Stones Bed & Breakfast is located in Wilton Center, New Hampshire, 1 1/2 hours northwest of Boston and 4 hours north of New York City. For information and reservations, call (603) 654-9048.

Laurie MacMillan is a freelance writer living in Petaluma, CA. Contact (707) 778-3163