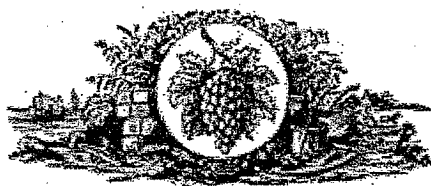


VINEYARD



GAZETTE

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At Last, a Blue Ribbon (Of Sorts)

By NORA JEAN LEVIN

Well, yes we did. At long last, my “darlings” have won a ribbon at the fair. A blue one (technically, pale blue — honorable mention), but blue nonetheless. A life dream now realized. And sweet it is.

Four years ago I chronicled the saga behind my own long-held ambition aroused in 1977 when I first spotted cherry tomatoes displayed in the exhibit hall at the West Tisbury Grange Hall.

To this first-time visitor from Washington, D.C., it was clear at a glance that to submit five plump, perfectly round, red tomato contenders attractively displayed on a paper plate required owning a piece of earth, and the time to plant, water and nurture them to maturity. That this simple feat required a total change in future lifestyle and marital goals was immediately obvious. Tomatoes took more than three or four weeks to grow. This plan would take years. Children would have to be grown up. Future jobs required the flexibility to leave Washington for months on end.

By 1995, we cleared the first hurdle. My husband and I bought land. Never mind it was one mile down a dirt road filled with boulders, poison ivy and briars — and lacked a house, water and even electrical connections. Never mind the first well was dry at 360 feet, or that the electrician didn’t show up for a year to give an estimate. Never mind we lived 500 miles from a construction job that stretched out far beyond any sane definition of normal. By the fall of 1999, I bought a pair of flowered gardening gloves, I was already up to step two.

In the past 10 years, my tiny Chilmark farm expanded from four feet square to an area of six feet. Since 2004, it has been guarded by a tall mesh fence to discourage the deer. By 2007, husband Michael had moved logs from the wood pile to thwart the curious bunnies.

That year, for the first time, I entered my “darlings,” only to discover that there were so many other contenders that mine were buried under other plates. There was no ribbon.

In 2008, Michael added a painted sign. The 2008 crop looked promising. I

celebrated a significant birthday, and my favorite candidate was about to be named the party favorite. But my own ribbon prospects were crushed when I attempted to submit an application form the Tuesday before the fair, only to learn from the rules that I was a day late. That was a blow.

This planting season did not begin well. We drove to the Island in mid-June for only a week's stay. Three nurseries were sold out of Sweet 100s, the strain of choice. It was raining so hard we could barely see out of the windshield, let alone slosh through the rows in search of six prime contenders. Stories about the dreaded late blight and other warnings on the need for crop rotation to ensure sufficient nutrients pierced my soul with dread. In the past decade, the oak tree had spread its limbs to block the hours of direct sun so favored by cherry tomatoes.

To counteract before planting, we added four 40-pound bags of new soil, mixed in designer blueberry/lobster mulch, plus generous portions of sanitized manure to fluff up the bed, finishing with yellow beads of plant food scattered underground and on the surface. The 60-day count down to fair day began.

Our favorite July tenant, whose lease included watering and tending instructions, willingly tended and watered, but left a note saying that things looked a little lean. The first August tomatoes worth eating were tasty, but few in number. But there was no evidence of late blight. At the Fiddlehead Farm stand, the owner mentioned the dearth of Island tomatoes. Many farmers had burned their fields. At Squibnocket, when discussing my prospects with family, an eavesdropper disparaged my chances despite my spirited defense of the potential bounty of tiny growing fields. If it's good enough for cheese and wine, why not cherry tomatoes?

Perhaps mine would be the only blight-less entry at the fair? Perhaps there was a hidden advantage of being so small? So far down a dirt road? So insignificant? So below the radar screen? So stubbornly, optimistically persistent? I remembered that our dearly departed Samoyed, Sam, had won his three firsts in breed in years past merely because he was the only Samoyed in the dog show.

So, this year my application for entry was days early. And Wednesday of fair week, I was in line with my nine contenders by 11 a.m. Crunch time. I asked other contestants at the table to help me choose the best. A little girl holding half a chocolate cake told me they all looked pretty good. They were red indeed, and pretty uniform in size, but were they round enough? I picked five with her help.

We had to leave the Island on Thursday, and went to the fairgrounds to check results before heading out, only to learn the judges were still deliberating.

"Not to worry," said my loyal and true friend Trudy Dick, whom I called for back-up support. Trudy has provided constant moral support for the last decade and, along with her husband and daughter, had sampled the remaining contenders on Wednesday afternoon, declaring them winners. She would report

in results, and that's just what happened Saturday when she called at 4:46 p.m. I haven't yet seen the picture she took, and still to be worked out are the details of collecting my ribbon in absentia.

I know the President was on Island last week, hopefully putting aside the worries of his job while enjoying the Vineyard's charms. He got the big prize last year. I got the little one this year. Yes we did. And how sweet it is.

Nora Jean Levin is a seasonal resident of Chilmark.

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