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MARCI MARTIN

Elizabeth Park's New Rosarian Has Big Plans

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'Colette' is draped languorously along the side entryway of Marci Martin's Windsor colonial. Her quartered shell-pink blooms, shading to light apricot at the center, are gorgeous, but at the moment she looks a bit impatient.

A climbing rose, "Colette" usually reaches a modest 5 feet. Martin's is already at about 12 feet, if you include its horizontal run between two corners of the porch, and it seems eager to run even farther.

"It wasn't supposed to be that big," Martin says. "I'm going to get some friends over here and we're going to take her over the roof."

It's not surprising that roses give their best for Martin, the new consulting rosarian for Hartford's Elizabeth Park Rose Garden. She spends most of her days either thinking about roses or caring for them, at home and at the park. Her enthusiasm and tender care inspire exuberant performance.

Martin ascended to the highest-profile position in Connecticut's passionate and close-knit circle of rose enthusiasts in November. But it's been bittersweet.

That's because it's not easy replacing the Rose Lady.

That would be Donna Fuss, co-founder of the Connecticut Rose Society and for many years the public face of the Elizabeth Park Rose Garden. Founded in 1904, it's the country's oldest municipal rose garden as well as a test garden for All-America Rose Selections, which evaluates new varieties of roses.

Fuss was a legendary figure in Connecticut gardening circles, a master rosarian and vocal advocate for the park.

Martin met Fuss several years ago through the Connecticut Rose Society, says Fuss' husband, Mike, rose garden chairman for the Friends of Elizabeth Park. At one point, Donna needed a second person to help with evaluating test garden roses, a judge-in-training, Mike Fuss says. So she recruited Martin to help with all the detailed forms the job requires. They became fast friends.

When Donna Fuss died at age 63 on the last day of September 2008, it wasn't long before Martin got a telephone call.

"I knew we'd need a rosarian soon because we'd be doing an inventory and getting the garden together for the spring," Mike Fuss says. "Within a week or so after Donna passed away, I asked her if she was interested in the job."

He brought the idea to the Friends' board, and Martin became the new consulting rosarian, a paid, part-time position.

"But everything is falling into place and I'm really happy with it — I feel she's with me all the time."

David Peterson, president of the Friends group, says the effervescent Martin was an easy choice.

"She spent a lot of time in the garden with Donna, and Donna picked her successor in a lot of ways," Peterson says. "There's no replacing Donna, but it seems like a miracle that Marci was available. She was an angel in the right place at the right time. I can't imagine a better situation, really."

Mike Fuss agrees: "I think she's doing a wonderful job. She's going to be terrific spokesperson for the rose garden and for Elizabeth Park and a great ambassador."

15,000 High-Maintenance Roses

After her appointment, Martin immediately began thinking about the future. "The first thing I did in the fall was evaluate all the roses and figure out what had to be done for the spring," she says.

Whatever had to be done, she knew, was going to get done without a lot of help. The park comprises 109 acres, and the 2 1/2 -acre rose garden has about 15,000 high-maintenance roses. As recently as 2004 or so, there were 28 Hartford city employees working at the park; now there are four. Martin says the city workers are wonderful, but anything they can't do has to be accomplished by volunteer labor.

That doesn't prevent her from having big plans.

The Friends group is replacing all 70 of the garden's trademark rose arches. It's an enormous project because dozens of feet of thorny climbing roses have to be disentangled and lowered to the ground to allow the cedar posts and cast iron hoops to be replaced. (The arch roses, all ramblers, are "Dorothy Perkins," pink; "White Dorothy"; "Excelsa," dark pink; and "Crimson Rambler.") Half the arches were replaced last year, Martin says; the other half are scheduled to be done this fall.

Although she knows it's a long shot, Martin also hopes to raise money to replace the elaborate but largely hidden watering system at the garden. Roses require a lot of water, and she's unhappy with the current soaker hose arrangement. She wants to switch to a more sophisticated emitter system.

Another project is finding a grant to pay for replacing all the rose-bed edging, a necessary barrier to ward off the inward creeping lawn.

Martin says she differs with her predecessor in a couple of areas: replacing roses and constantly changing the soil in the beds. She says Fuss used to order 1,500 roses every season. Martin has no plans to buy at that level, both because it's expensive and because she doesn't think it's necessary.

"I love all roses, and I don't want to yank them out if I don't have to," she says, but "there will always be new varieties of roses in the garden. A few beds will be new each year."

And some treasured old varieties will always remain: "Madame Caroline Testout," "General Washington" and "La Reine" are all original to the park.

As for the beds, she prefers amending the existing soil with organic matter rather than replacing it.

Restoration Plans

Perhaps the biggest project being planned is a restoration of the Heritage Rose Garden, a secluded section of the park now obscured by giant yews, brush and trees. It was set aside for Old Garden Roses, generally those roses developed before 1900. The group includes some of the most beloved of all roses and has a cultish following all its own.

Martin says an eight-year project, which still needs approval by the city, is envisioned and would be timed for the 100th anniversary of the Connecticut Valley Garden Club.

But that's the future. For now, it's June — the "High Holy Days" for rose people — and Martin has been working feverishly to get the Elizabeth Park garden ready for the climax of the season, the annual Rose Weekend. It's scheduled for today through Sunday, when the roses are expected to be in peak bloom.

When asked how she feels about taking over Donna's duties, Martin answers quickly but precisely.

"I felt really happy and really, really sad when I was offered this job," Martin says. "I'm sad because my friend had to die for me to get it."