



Catherine Cosby's alpine garden.

The Challenges of *Creating a Garden* in the Alps

To Catherine Cosby, founder of the charity Ski 2 Freedom, developing an alpine garden mirrors life lessons.

An Interview By Vanessa Neil

Spring has arrived, although one could quite easily believe it is summer with such glorious hot sunshine, and even though there is still snow on the high pastures and peaks, all the plants are budding or blooming—a sense of new beginnings and hope. Each flower, shrub or tree has lain dormant over the winter and like life itself, a new cycle begins.

For one remarkable woman, creating a garden is a reflection of how she discovered a new purpose in life—the garden is an analogy of how she started the Foundation Ski 2 Freedom. For many of us, life can be challenging—for Catherine, the challenge was having a daughter with a very rare neurological disorder (Rett Syndrome). Through sheer determination she has, like the alpine flowers, kept going through the winter to flower again in the spring, taking strength from the pure air and natural elements to be found in the mountains and other “gardens” of the world. Gardening and the nurturing of plants is something we all do at some stage of our lives,

whether it be a window box or a large rambling garden, it is a hobby we can all gain new life from—for our health, well-being and psychological equilibrium.

What was your aim when you began creating this garden in the mountains for everyone to enjoy, and who did you feel would benefit from it most?

It took me many years to try to make sense of what had happened in my life. Gardening, like mountain activities,

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Produce from Catherine Cosby's garden.

gives me a personal understanding of the therapeutic benefits of exercise and being with nature, and how it can help other people—especially those whose lives are affected by illness or trauma—to feel included and empowered. By planting seeds and cuttings from plants, I have discovered that sharing the garden with others gives both pleasure and life-enhancing benefits.

Why do you take such strength from creating a garden and was it an easy undertaking?

I have always loved gardening as I find digging and planting extremely therapeutic. Like the Foundation I started, when I began creating my new garden, I had an idea of what I wanted it to look like, but getting others to see my vision was not so easy! However, now some years later, the vision has become a reality and the excitement of seeing the roses, lavender, tulips and other plants reappear stronger each year is so rewarding; visitors immediately see my dream.

One can make mistakes in a garden, just like in life, but the challenge is to learn from them and move on. We all tend to want instant gratification and can be lured into buying too many plants—many the wrong color, size or shape—and then we need to spend hours redoing the work we started. So take your time, be patient, do your research and only plant what you know will grow well in the environment around you. It might take longer, but it will be far more rewarding in the end!

An herbaceous border can be like this. It can be so tempting to over-plant and let things grow a little out of control. But I found that if I cut back the plants, divide them, do some pruning and clearing, they actually grow stronger—like my own projects with the Foundation. The reward of

seeing healthy, beautiful flowers and foliage is not only gratifying, but so much more beneficial.

Do you feel that it is a good idea to have help in the garden?

Definitely! Take the planting of geraniums (such a wonderful Swiss delight)—even if we have an idea of what our garden, balcony or an apartment window-box will look like, often a little help and advice is useful when there are so many choices—on color especially—to be made. Seeing what others have done can be extremely motivating and productive. Look and learn and never be afraid to ask for help or advice. Even expert gardeners are always keen to learn from others and find new plants to grow. I feel strongly that sharing ideas and experiences is enormously beneficial, be it in garden work, or in any other work we may do.

Now that your garden is maturing so well, what encouragement can you give others who may want to plant a new a garden, or who are re-discovering one that needs love and attention?

Never be afraid of following your heart and believing in your dreams. What might seem a daunting and unattainable task—especially when you are beginning from scratch with just a grassy, over-grown piece of Alpine pasture—can become reality if you take time to talk to other gardeners, look around you and plant flowers that are in keeping with your environment—they will thrive! But think outside the box: just because the hibiscus is thought to be a Mediterranean or tropical plant does not mean that it won't grow in the Alps—it originally came from the Mountains in China.

I am passionate about so many things in life and do have a habit of not always taking the time to think a project through, such as the flowering bed of roses and shrubs in my mind's eye. But as the years go by and I listen to others, I am getting better at planning my garden! Like life, plants are finite: some live for only a year, some for several and others for many. Not all are perfect, but a garden is somewhere that, unlike reality, everything can bloom and grow inclusively and in unity...if only we could transplant this concept into the real world. My dream is to do just that with all my work. ♦