

OUR FAMILY



PHOTOS COURTESY SAHRA ESMONDE-WHITE

SECRET GARDEN

Fitness CEO Sahra Esmonde-White is spending the pandemic restoring her much-missed grandmother's garden, bed by bed. Olivia Stren falls in love with a madcap, magical family



Inasmuch as it's even possible to summarize a relationship with a single image, there's one photo that perfectly telegraphs Sahra Esmonde-White's relationship with her grandparents, Anstace and Larry Esmonde-White: a little Sahra (maybe seven — she can't remember) is riding on the back of a pony in the dining room of her grandparents' farmhouse. Teddy, the pony, is eating from his green bowl, which sits decorously on a cloth placemat. As I look at the picture (I can't stop looking at the picture), I realize that I'm not sure I've seen three happier creatures in the same frame. I also realize that I reserve a special kind of jealousy for people who have ridden a pony in their house. (I feel I must add here that when I was a child, my grandmother would hardly let me eat in her dining room let alone arrive at the table on horseback.) "This was something a kid would think up," remembers Sahra. "But it wasn't, 'Oh, Grandma, can we please bring the pony in for dinner? This was her idea! My grandmother was having a ball! Teddy was having a ball! Everybody was having a ball!"

It's the kind of vignette — of purposeful silliness and madcap charm — that seems like it trotted off the pages of Gerald Durrell's memoir "My Family and Other Animals." Sahra remembers the house and gardens in Kemptville, Ont., where she spent so many happy summers as a child, as being as full of antiques as it was of animals. "The animals would just come in straight from the garden, dirt and all! There were no restrictions. My childhood had many constraints, but my grandmother's house was an escape. It was freedom." That same freedom, that breathing-out sense of the world opening up, still greets Sahra when she goes up the driveway of her grandparents' house and to the British country gardens she has now resolved to restore, bed by bed. Sahra is a fitness instructor and

I thought I was giving my grandmother a gift by saying, 'Don't worry, I'll take care of your garden.' But this wasn't my gift to her; it was her final big gift to me.

There was, of course, a considerable obstacle she didn't know how to garden. "My friends used to call me the plant killer because I couldn't even keep a plant in the house!" she says. She set about reading up on the science of soil, researching bits of her own memories and slowly making her way through her grandmother's gardening library, looking at pictures and watching old TV footage. "Learning this way — by following her — feels very special. I find myself talking to her in the garden in a happy, joyful way. She's there!" The restoration is a living, verdant valentine to her grandmother.

The metaphors and life lessons are proving as bountiful as the garden itself. "What I'm realizing is everything wants to grow, and it doesn't even need that much," says Sahra. "I also realized that I thought I was giving my grandmother a gift by saying 'Don't worry, I'll take care of your garden.' But this wasn't my gift to her; it was her final big gift to me!" Sahra had worried that committing to this would mean a loss of other freedoms and possibilities, but it turned out to be the opposite: "Committing to something is its own freedom."

All of this talk about freedom makes me think about our collective lack of it over this past year. If these have been times largely defined by privations and scarcity and tedium, the gardens — in their abundance and unpredictability — provide a refuge from the tyranny of sameness. We are at the point in the pandemic where we are flat-lining from long-haul exhaustion, suffering from a condition that writer Adam Grant has defined as "languishing" — the malaise of stasis — and what has lately felt to me like the unbearable beige of being. But there is nothing beige in a garden. "In a garden, the world isn't flat anymore!" says Sahra. "If a flower blooms: you're up! You're always up and down. You may have disappointments — my cauliflower didn't grow last year — but you can always start again." And at a time so fertile with endings, a garden offers the companionship — and consolation — of beginnings.

But it's the end, not the beginning, of the season that Sahra loves best, when syrupy late-August sunshine filters through the maple trees and the hummingbirds career through the pink phlox and lavender. "The hummingbirds are so happy in my grandmother's garden," she says. They are all surely having a ball.

SPOTLIGHT

Happily

Steph Davidson celebrates a trio of smitten couples in long-term care whose romances have lasted more than half a century



“Their relationship is not defined by the illness; it's defined by the time, the challenges and the experience that they have shared together.”

Adele and Ivan Lymar are in their 70s together, and Adele, who has a up-to-one straight-ahead piece of advice: never hold a grudge.

The pair, who are both 94, live in Charlewell Worthing Long Term Care Residence in Mississauga and met in 1950, when they lived in the same Hamilton apartment building. After seven months of dating and plenty of dancing at local nightclubs, Ivan gave Adele a surprising Christmas gift that makes her chuckle to this day.

He presented his then girlfriend with an ironing board — not the most romantic of gifts. She did know what to make of it. "I was 'What's this?' and I was not happy. He said, 'How come don't smile?' I said, 'What's so funny about that?' says Adele.

It was a long time ago, but the gift — an engagement ring — proposing. The couple met three weeks later.

Adele didn't hold Ivan against him and says of the strongest aspects of their relationship is their ability to quickly, usually over a "We never go to bed memories with Ivan time they spent together and dancing. "We dance. Oh, my God, sure, dancing any when we got our record player on with a laugh.

Tiziana Ceccaton aide at the live in, says participating in what they can. "I together."

The couple so Ivan with Adele resident

FROM THE ARCH



Ernest P...