

November, 2011, An Interview with Berkeley Zen Center's Head Gardener, Nancy McClellan

by Meghan Collins

Five evenings a week, if you come in the gate of Berkeley Zen Center, you are likely to see Nancy McClellan in a red jacket, working with rake or clippers. Every Saturday morning, and during all sesshins, she is present to lead the garden helpers during work periods. Nancy has been head gardener for the sangha for the past three-and-a-half years, following Tamar in this practice position.

Nancy's interest in gardening began in college with succulents and cacti in pots. She now has a 40'x40' garden at home where she grows winter vegetables, tomatoes, herbs, and flower bulbs. Her vision for the Zen Center garden is to try to keep the lushness of spring all year round, and to foster "a place that is from every angle appealing." She gives credit to many others who have helped her over the years, both hands-on and with advice. In the 90s, the late Dolly Gattozzi and a group of her friends worked continually in the garden, as, more recently, did Catherine Cascade before she moved to Oregon. In earlier years, Patrick McMahon placed the garden rocks. Marian Yu, Miriam Queen, and arborist Sachiyo Aoyama shared their work and expertise. The present aesthetic pruner, Lary Huls, is a strong resource, and Nobuo Iwanaga gives loving care to the memorial garden.

Now, there is exciting activity on the zendo's west side. Catharine Lucas and Dianne Schnapp have each taken a space and are designing fresh beds in their own styles, so watch for new developments there.

Nancy has been an artist since the age of six, when she made her bedroom closet into a studio where she secluded herself for hours to draw and paint. She is a graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute, where she earned a Master of Fine Arts degree. For many years afterwards, she painted in oils by day in her live-in loft studio, bolstering her income with many art and non-art jobs, including night work at Macy's and I. Magnin.

Her paintings attracted a following but, like most artists, she needed a steady day job for survival, and for 23 years she worked as an assistant in an Oakland law office specializing in class action suits on home-improvement scams (mostly vinyl siding). The flexible hours there allowed her to continue her own work and the work enabled her to buy the house in north Oakland where she has lived for more than two decades.

Since leaving the law office in 2006, she says that she is busier than ever. "I am never bored. It is a three-ring circus," but a wearying one, to manage house maintenance, art, Zen practice, and gardening all at once. She does not paint at present, but draws from life every day and works with photographs to keep her artist's eye fresh. She also writes plays, and belongs to a private

improvisation group among friends, which she says gives her ideas for playwriting.

Nancy revealed that she has a fondness for aliases, which she says stems from her self-effacing mother's condemnation of "pushy" behavior. "Dressed up like a circus horse" was her mother's put-down for any signs of showing off. Therefore, if you look up Nancy's e-mail address in our directory, you will find "friedabates," which began as her high-school alias of "Frieda Bates." Her *nom de paintbrush* is "Gloria Boatwright."

Like many of us, Nancy's path toward Zen began with books when she was in college. She read Meister Eckhart, St. Teresa of Avila, Martin Buber, and Suzuki Roshi's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. She first came to BZC (looking for a Suzuki Roshi-based center close to home) in 1992, "in the midst of a terrible love affair," but she observes dryly that, as a basis for Zen practice, that didn't work out too well. Later, in '96, she returned for a better reason—inspired by friends, she wanted to practice Zen. Once she was settled in, "Rebecca Mayeno dragged me by the ear to Mel, and said to him, 'Nancy wants lay ordination.'"

Since taking the head gardener position Nancy is in the zendo less than she used to be, but she sits when she can, attends classes and ceremonies, and has a home meditation practice. She hopes to sit part of Rohatsu sesshin. Gardening is her main practice and chief joy. She also enjoys working with so many varied people in the sangha, although she feels she has a long way to go in interacting with people. Perhaps it is modest Frieda Bates who adds, "but almost every time things work out in inexplicably miraculous ways."

One thing is certain: no one can enter the grounds of Berkeley Zen Center and not be affected by the beauty and peace that has been nurtured there by Nancy McClellan and her predecessors.