

It Still Lives, Season 4 Episode 1: A Diary of an Appalachian Garden

I'm Mignon Durham and we are in Pinner's Cove, which is the southern edge of Asheville, North Carolina.

We are sitting by Robinson Creek, which flows the length of my property. The headwaters of Robinson Creek is at the top of Busby Mountain, which is still owned by the Cecil family—the Vanderbilts. This property, when I bought it in 2012, I named it 'Devotion.' And I had no idea where my life was going to take me, as it relates to the garden and the woods that surround us, but I felt immediately at home and we're surrounded by turkeys who are clucking up the hill from where we're sitting. Much of the trees and flora around us were here, but they were covered with invasive species like multiflora rose, bittersweet, poison ivy. And when I bought the property, you could hear the creek, but you couldn't see it, it was so overgrown. And I had no idea what would happen, but I knew that removing those invasive species was a high priority. And lo and behold, the first spring, about February, the trout lily and the bloodroot popped up and I knew, okay, this is what I'm supposed to be doing, clearing this land.

LK: This space specifically, you know, we asked you to take us to the place that meant the most to you during covid, during the pandemic, when you've been here on this property. Tell us what it is about where we're sitting that meant so much to you during that time.

MD: I had friends live with me much of the summer of 2020, and it was so wonderful having company. And we would sit down here every afternoon and have a cup of tea or, in my case, a cup of coffee, but we would hear the creek, we would see the wildflowers that were blooming, the hummingbirds that were coming by. And there's a tree across the creek that was full of woodpecker holes, and so we would watch the woodpeckers come and go and one day Jason was sitting down here by himself. And there was a huge thud, and a large black racer fell out of the tree and started chasing a rabbit. So we have the turkeys come by, we had the bear come by further up the hill one afternoon. It was a little nerve-wracking, but he just kept on walking through. So nature happens here, and there goes the red-tailed hawk. He just flew out of his tree. So sitting here is a place where I get restored. Where I find hope against all odds of what I read in the newspaper. So this is my happy place.

KA: What do you think it is about nature and this space specifically that enables you to find that hope and how do you think that it brought you and your friends together during that time? What solace does nature actually offer you?

MD: What I've learned about gardening is that it's a huge physical labor, but the real reward comes when you allow yourself the time to sit down and witness what's around you. And in witnessing it, it's with your eyes, it's with your ears, it's with your nose. And even with your taste. Being here, being outdoors is a place to shut out the chaos, the noise, the hyperactivity of the world around us. And I live aware of where the sun rises and where it sets, what time of day it is by the sun. And I know so many people who can't tell you where south is. And my whole house is built predicated on where south is. Being in nature just makes me feel that I belong and that I've created a relationship with these critters and these plants around me and because I see the birds and the butterflies and the bees come back, it's like they're saying, "Thank you." It's a real relationship.

KA: When we talk about Appalachia, we often talk about this relationship aspect, you know, this really close-knit relationship with the land and the communities around you. I know you grew up in a more

urban setting, so what made you choose Appalachia? Do you feel Appalachian? Do you feel that there's something special about this region specifically?

MD: There is the singing of the angels that happens to me when I drive up to Penland School of Craft. And that was my first, real, in-depth digging deep into Appalachia. And a friend, Jim Hanes, took me to a board meeting so I would understand what Penland School is all about. But you go up this winding road and you get to the top and just opens up in front of you. And I didn't know how, but I knew my life was going to change because of Penland. And ultimately I moved there but then it was a matter of knowing my "from here" neighbors and my "not from here" artists friends who had moved into the area. And while I don't think I will ever be considered to be a true Appalachian by the Appalachian people, I believe that we value each other. We have the same respect for the differences in our lives, but the things that we have in common. I will live my last day in these mountains.

LK: When Kami and I talk about Appalachia, we talk a lot about community. And I know that a lot of people find community in the wilderness, but it's also about the people that you connect with and the people who are part of the Appalachian region. I know you've built this beautiful location for yourself that's also still isolated. So how do you think about your connection to the community here in this region?

MD: When I think about Appalachian community, it is much more diverse and richer than the stereotypes that you read about. And I won't mention any names, but Appalachia is a very rich region. So there are people that lived close to me, especially when I was at Penland, who would take me foraging for mushrooms. There were people who would put a bottle of moonshine on my back porch. There were artists who welcomed me to their studios. And I find when you meet anybody on their terms and are curious about their life, they'll welcome you. My neighbors, where I was living, I felt they were family. We looked after each other. So there are many ways that I feel I connected and created community. And my, this is the best part of my life.

But I got to meet some of the Penland artists while I was still living in Winston-Salem. And to have these incredibly talented, smart, well-traveled people take you in as a friend, just made me feel so happy. It was a source of great gratitude. And then I felt I needed to give back to them, but being with the artists safely in Winston-Salem but then ultimately moving to Penland, it was the greatest gift ever. And the artists give so much to the community, whether they're performing artists or visual artists, they are always giving back to the community. And they are a real thread to connecting diverse parts of the community together.

LK: So, one piece of what brought us here today was you reaching out after hearing us talk about Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle's book and it's because you've written your own book during covid about this place that you've built and how it impacted you during the pandemic.

MD: Actually, writing the book was not my idea. A dear friend, Wade Shelton, called me and said, "I have a suggestion and you can take it or leave it, but you need to write a book." And I said, "Wade, what am I going to write about?" And he said, "You need to write about your garden." And I was—we were on the phone and it wasn't Face Time, so I was rolling my eyes and thinking, "What a dumb idea." But I was very polite and when we hung up, the idea of writing a book would not leave my head. And one day I was on a really tough uphill bicycle ride. And all I wanted to do was get off that bicycle. But I started talking to myself, and I said, "Why don't you go home and write a chapter? You don't have to tell anybody. And if you hate writing, you don't have to write a book. You can just throw it away. But, go home and try it."

And I came home that afternoon and found a lightness to my spirit that I didn't know could exist during covid. And I also know my personality is such that had I not been forced to be still, I could never have written a book. So I had a great blessing from covid. It forced me to be still, to be home.

I knew writing the book, there'd be a time when I actually had the book in hand. Then what? Well, I was sort of dreading this. It was like, "Oh, well, I have to go talk to people. I've got to promote myself." What I have found in, I think it's now three weeks since I've had the book, is the warmest encouragement and support from independent bookstores, from the botanical garden, from the arboretum, from gardens across the state, independent retailers. So I feel really excited that I've created a book that's beautiful, that imparts information whether you're coming at it from an art point of view or a horticulture point of view.

LK: A lot of the book goes into a lot of the details about building your home, building this garden, kind of the long design process and everything that went into it. and I think sometimes when we talk about being more eco-conscious, being more—in thinking about how we're spending our money—I think some of that comes with privilege, of being able to focus on that over other things. How do you think about that relationship as you've built your garden and your home and you're trying to share this advice with the community?

MD: I feel the greatest privilege to be at a place in my life where I could do this, both from a physical point of view as well as a financial point of view. But I feel a great responsibility to share what I've learned and whether I'm talking about the LEEDs certification on my house or why I'm adding solar panels to generate more electricity, which we just finished yesterday. I feel a great responsibility to share that information and I've been studying and reading about environmental issues for 20 years now. And I sort of take some of my knowledge for granted. But there are other people who are just beginning to pay attention, with all the climate change going on around us. They're just beginning to pay attention. So, I felt it was a responsibility because of my privilege.

KA: For those who may not have gardens or access to you know, a lot of green spaces, especially urban areas, what pieces of advice can you offer them to find the same sort of healing and peace and calm that you've been able to achieve here?

MD: I think everybody can put a pot out on their patio, if they have no green space whatsoever. They can put a pot out and put some coneflower or some milkweed and they will be sustaining the butterflies and the birds and the bees. If you have a yard of grass, start thinking about how to reduce the amount of just grass that you have. That does nothing to support the diversity of wildlife. And think of all the labor and time and money you spend mowing the grass and fertilizing the grass. You're using fossil fuels and the phosphates are washing into the creeks. So if you can just reduce your grass. If you can put one or two pots out. Anything you do makes a difference. And a dear, I would like to call him a colleague, but he's so far ahead of me. His name is Doug Tallamy and he's at the University of Delaware. And he's just created this program called Backyard National Park and everybody, no matter how much space they have, can be on his map and say what I've done to create a wilder, more diverse space around my house. And my 2.77 acres is not going to change the world, but if there are a million 2.77 acres, we will change the world.

LK: I think we've talked about this in a couple different ways, but throughout the pandemic we really saw huge numbers of people going out into the woods. The Great Smoky Mountain National Park had over 12 million visitors. And really this ability to explore, which is what you're talking about, with the pathways through the woods is just such a piece of that forest. I recently did a story with the volunteer

coordinator at the Great Smoky Mountain National Park and kind of the other side of that is they had about just over 100,000 hours of volunteer service to kind of keep up the park. How do you think about the balance of exploration and community and healing in the forest?

MD: Well, I think having volunteers get connected whether it's to the Great Smokies or to Conserving Carolinas, it is a wonderful way they can expand the scope of their mission. And without those volunteers, we wouldn't have the Hickory Nut Gorge, miles of trails that we have. The Great Smoky Mountains benefits from these volunteers who then talk to their friends and family about what they are doing. So volunteerism is very important. I do worry about how wild we're going to be able to keep places, and that story is repeat history when you read about the creation of the Appalachian Trail. The two men fought vigorously about this is supposed to be remote and nobody there, and this other belief that it's about settling there and creating community around this hiking trail. So how do we keep these sacred spaces wild? And I must say, there's bad behavior out there in the public. Litter and picking plant material, not paying attention to staying on paths when they've indicated that there's some rare plant species out there. So I think it's all a matter of continuing to inform and get people connected to organizations or to hiking groups where they can be shown the rules of the road and protect it. because I think everybody needs to get out into the wild.

KA: Would you mind reading part or all of the poem that's at the end of the book about you? Would he mind if you read it?

MD: Jason would not mind and I must tell you that I still cry when I read that poem. The title of the poem is "Reverence". Only people with excuses are walking springs weekday / men with Labradors / women carriage strolling / and poets holding metaphors / but the gardener on Robinson Creek Road marches wheelbarrows / cradles bulbs and roots / cups fresh loams we'll never hold / she named tulip poplars for me once / *Magnolia soulangeana* outside the Carl Sandberg House / twinned like Cynthia and Edwina / An acuary (??) we once breathed in Himalayan poppies / whose blue pulses were too soft to count / more powerful than the bells from Belles / each were sermons spoken by the earth / bettering all of us / because she knows enough to kneel.=

LK: That was beautiful, I don't know if you've heard our other podcasts, but the first piece we did for this covid series was about Rufus Morgan and Penland and Lucy Morgan, and it just feels like we're having, continuing to have these same conversations about, you know, what is the future of the wilderness of Western North Carolina, something that people have cared so much about for such a long time. And seems like this will be a conversation we'll continue to have.

MD: The threads of Western North Carolina are the craft, nature, Penland, John C. Campbell, the Great Smoky Mountains--those are legendary stories. The building of the Blue Ridge Parkway, the construction of the Appalachian Trail. We are so blessed. And I don't think anybody can live here and not experience all of those things eventually.