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Marcia Fluer's beautiful garden in Golden Valley

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As a TV political correspondent, Marcia Fluer learned to be tough when it was necessary.

That's a lesson she now applies in her garden: There's no coddling of delicate plants.

"Anything that can't live here deserves to die," she said. "You make it in Minnesota or you don't."

She says this with a charming smile, the same combination of straight talk and warmth that made Fluer a trusted and popular presence in Twin Cities living rooms during the 1970s and '80s, as a reporter and one of the first female TV anchors in this market.

Fluer left TV news in 1988, then spent the next decade as director of public relations for the University of Minnesota. Now she stays busy as a PR consultant and keeper of a large model-railroad garden in Golden Valley.

She tends the plants. Her husband, actor Phil Ross, tends the train. It runs through an enchanted miniature landscape filled with distinctive buildings that Ross builds from scratch.

There's a tiny replica of the Burwell house of Minnetonka, a little station from the 1800s that still stands near Minnehaha Park, and "Nim's Bait & Boat Shop," dubbed for Fluer's friend and former TV colleague Dave Nimmer. "He wanted it, we built it for him, and invited him over to christen it," Fluer said.

There's even a miniature brothel, "Vera's Cathouse" (named for a now deceased neighbor), tricked out with tiny "fallen women" figurines. "I told her I wanted to make a rough bar, like you see out West," Ross said. Vera, a theater designer, created the floozy figurines.

All kinds of whimsical miniatures find their way into the garden. "The neighbor kids give us things," Fluer said. "Like this giraffe. He really doesn't belong. But why not?"

Fluer has long dabbled in gardening. "I started as a kid," she said, "because neither of my parents were interested."

Now that she's retired, she has more time to nurture her landscape, not that she'd describe it that way. "I'm really not a very good mother to my garden," she said. "But I'm out here all the time. I'm constantly surprised at what the plants are doing."

'Hostaholics'

The front-yard garden is what first attracted her to the house, which they bought more than 20 years ago. It was professionally landscaped, with a cascading waterfall visible from the street.

"I drove in the driveway and said, 'I love this house,'" Fluer recalled. "Actually, I loved the water feature. Then I walked inside." The house was less to her liking. Ditto for the back yard. "There was a cottonwood on one side. A soft maple on



A large waterfall is the focal point of the front-yard garden, where Fluer mixes colors freely. "Nature doesn't have a palette," she noted.

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the other," she recalled. "It was shady. The grass was sparse and nothing else was growing."

But they bought the property anyway, determined to transform it.

Over the years, Fluer and Ross have hauled in rocks and added a pond, turning their back yard into a lush English cottage-style garden. "Perennials are the backbone," Fluer said. "I love texture, color and contrast. I don't want anything to scream at me."

Hostas are well-represented, in a wide array of colors and sizes. "We've become hostaholics," Ross said. "There's always room for one or two more."

While some gardeners nip the buds to focus on foliage, Fluer lets her hostas flower. "The bees like it," she said. "Some of the flowers are pretty. Some are magnificent. A couple of late bloomers bloom fuchsia."

Fluer is patient with her hostas. "Nothing is good until the third year," she said. "If you're impatient, you never get the full enjoyment. Let it show you what it can do before you decide to move or divide it."

She's had plants that she thought were dead that are now flourishing in her garden. But she's also had many casualties. "If we have a winter with no snow cover, it can kill off half the garden," she said. "Don't expect Minnesota to be kind to you. It'll break your heart, honey."

Train's arrival

The back-yard garden became a railroad garden about 10 years ago. Ross had gotten interested in model trains years earlier when he played Buffalo Bill in a production of "Annie Get Your Gun" and became fascinated with 19th-century history, particularly local railroad history. "I thought, 'This might keep me out of trouble.'"

His first construction job was a little church inspired by the "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" movie. "That got me started," he said.

Today, the clusters of miniature buildings and plants are arranged to create tiny garden rooms, with surprises to discover as you move through the garden. One of Fluer's two sons, a landscape architect, taught her that concept. "You don't want to see everything all at once," she said. "It's OK if Nim's is hidden behind the cypress."

In addition to maintaining the buildings and the train, not to mention digging holes, Ross has taken on an unusual garden role: water tuner.

He carefully arranges the rocks in the waterfall to get just the right "burbling sound. If it's flat, it doesn't do that," said the oboeist and singer. "One rock in the middle will interrupt the flow."

Every spring, Fluer and Ross host a "waterfall opening party." They love to entertain outdoors all season long. "What's the point of doing this if you can't show it to anybody?" Fluer said. "If people ask more than two questions out front, they get dragged back here. It's nasty not to share. Real gardeners share plants and ideas. You have to have a terrific sense of humor to be a gardener in Minnesota."

Her granddaughter gave her a piece of garden art, a little sign that says: "Grow Dammit." "That's pretty much my philosophy," Fluer said. "Put it in, and see what happens."

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