Readers' Forum

A Gardener after "Retiring"

Conrad B. Link¹

As an avid gardener, retiring from a career in horticulture and moving to smaller living quarters from a large house with a personally landscaped yard called for a big change. In August 1993, my wife and I did it. With careful planning, we moved into a two-bedroom, independent-living apartment on the eighth floor in a retirement community. We were familiar with this community as we had several friends already living here.

In this community, three apartment buildings are connected by greenhouse-like glass arcades or corridors to a central building containing the dining room, assembly hall, and offices. These arcades are used daily by all of the residents as they go to the dining room and to activities in the assembly hall. Many persons take their daily walks in the area as it is available regardless of the weather.

Shortly after moving here, I contacted the Landscape-Grounds Dept. and requested permission to plant a flower border along each of the three arcades. There were several small plantings of azaleas adjacent to the arcades, otherwise there was just lawn. I wanted a border about 6 feet wide to fit into the general design of the area. After a short conversation concerning my suggestion, the answer was: "Yes, a planting of flowers would be seen by all of the residents, and they would enjoy

it." So that evening, I prepared my first bulb order (actually, I already had it outlined), sending it off the next morning.

The first border was prepared and planted that fall. Since then, I have been told that certain residents doubted that anything could be grown in that "poor dirt." In Spring 1994, a similar area was prepared along the arcade from the second building, and, in Spring 1995, another area was prepared along the third arcade. Some grading and construction of a simple, low wall was necessary to have a border similar to the others. The combined length of the borders was about 250 feet.

All of the borders have at least half a day of sun and some shade from the nearby buildings. Each border has been planted with different kinds of plants, at least different cultivars or species. In the case of annuals, there are plants of

the same kind in each border, but of different colors or forms to achieve masses of color for the summer and fall. I have tried to include a few of the very early as well as the very late flowering bulbs. There are about 150 different types of plants, including some that are less-frequently grown. I have avoided those that grow too tall or that spread too rapidly. Topping or pruning is done carefully to induce larger displays of bloom. The removal of old flowers encourages some regrowth and, perhaps, more flowering of some plants. Several species have attracted much attention because of their effective displays or long periods of flowering, such as the long-spurred columbine, *Lisianthus*, gloriosa daisy, *Eucomis*—the pineapple lily, *Colchicum*, fall-flowering crocus, Japanese anemone, *Sternbergia*, and the lilies. By midsummer, many of the perennials have completed flowering, and the major display is from the annuals that have been planted over the spring-flowering bulbs. Pansies, seeded in late summer and transplanted in the fall, are excellent. They have some flowers in the fall and are ready to flower with the first warming days of spring. They are excellent plants to use with lilies.

One of the features that has been well received is the posting at the time of flowering of a small sign (3 × 5 inches) on the window inside the corridor with the common name of the plant in flower in large letters and, in small letters, the scientific name, region or country of origin, and some

¹Professor of horticulture, emeritus, University of Maryland, College Park, MD.

interesting facts. A small stake with a green label marks the plant in the garden outside.

The residents of these apartments are in their retirement years and generally are active. They do not have the responsibilities of maintaining a home and garden. Some are less able to do such work. I receive many comments about the flower border, such as:

- Seeing flowers of some kinds reminds me of kinds I used to grow.
- I can't believe there are so many more colors or with flowers that are larger than what I once grew.
- A spring comment—Just can't hardly wait for the crocus.
- The flowers remind me of grandmother's garden.

"Thank you" comments and notes

are common while passing in the halls or as notes in my mailbox. The only "complaint" I have received was from a person who said, "It takes me longer to walk through the arcade when the flowers are in bloom."

Others who may get a chance to see the flowers are persons who live in the Health Care Center, an adjacent building, who are brought over in their wheelchairs by visiting relatives or friends. And I have had several suggestions from residents of other locations on our campus as to where I can plant more flower display gardens.

I'm pleased that my gardening activities are appreciated by so many. Isn't that one of the joys of gardening—whether it's flowers, fruit, or vegetables?