

“POTS OF LOVE” FOR LINDA YANG (1937–2020)

Author, former *New York Times* columnist, and long-time MCNARGS member Linda Yang passed away on April 20 at the age of 83. Here are a few words in remembrance of a unique and accomplished woman.

ON THE BEAUTIFUL spring Saturday of May 2 – instead of plant-hunting with good friend Linda Yang at the MCNARGS Annual Plant Sale (coronavirus-cancelled like the rest of life) – I was gardening-in-place in Brooklyn, writing a remembrance of the late Linda by way of pole-pruning “Ivy League Ivy” off my Japanese Maple. (Having never forgotten once exclaiming to Linda: “Look! Ivy League Ivy!” Linda: “That’s not ivy. That’s *Parthenocissus quinquefolia!*”) On April 20, 2020, Linda Yang had left this life after 83 years, from her 18th floor Manhattan home.

I remembered meeting Linda Yang, *The New York Times* gardening columnist I’d been reading, in May 1981. Her editor at the *Times*, Dona Guimaraes, had dispatched her to Brooklyn (her 1937 birth borough) to check me out and my gardening in the matter of the “Moss Canoe Planters” I’d made and written up. (Linda’s photos and my story ran June 2, 1981.)

Linda was not a birthright gardener. In fact, gardening and garden writing made up her second career, after she’d practiced as an architect with Edward Durell Stone. In the 1970’s – living in an East Side apartment – Linda began greening her terrace and taking notes. Pretty soon she was writing *The Terrace Gardener’s Handbook* on a typewriter – with a 1975 publication deadline. (Linda observed deadlines religiously.) Midway through that first book she landed in the hospital with cancer (and typewriter). Linda kept on typing. Cancer be damned! She made the deadline.

Once Linda joined the *New York Times*, in 1979, she covered the garden beat with such enthusiasm that she managed to bring gardening and garden writing back from suburbia. Linda had much to do with the greening of New York City. She introduced *Times* readers to community gardening – the “Green Guerillas” and founders Liz Christy and Amos Taylor – after they started lobbing “seed grenades” into trash-filled vacant lots, persuading the city to lease the lots for community gardens. (Later she wrote about the GGs, who, under Tessa Huxley, began giving Citizen Street Tree Pruning classes and issuing C.S.T.P. certificates.) She wrote about “The Pits,” an antic group of city gardeners who only grew plants that would sprout from fruit pits. She faithfully volunteered with the BBG Auxiliary for their Spring Plant Sale (always held the first week in May, but coronavirus-cancelled this year.) She wrote about the Herb Society of America’s exemplary Herb Garden at the John Jay Homestead State Historic Site in Katonah, New York. (Herbalist Yang prescribed I grow and imbibe *Tanacetum parthenium* – feverfew – for my migraines. Eureka!) By the 1990’s she had put it all down in *The City Gardener’s Handbook*. In the 20th century Linda was still writing on typewriters, making carbon copies, phoning it in to the *Times* on landlines and mailing handwritten notes in green ink, signed “Pots of Love.” By the 21st century she had adapted to computer garden writing. She used e-inks of green and red and blue and took the e-name Lindaplants@aol.com.

In 1960, in Istanbul, Linda married fellow University of Pennsylvania architect John Yang. He too subsequently moved beyond architecture, and became a noted landscape photographer. In the late 1970’s they left their East Side terrace garden to buy a ramshackle brownstone in Turtle Bay on East 51st. They rebuilt the house and transformed the rock-strewn rectangle out back into a peaceable, grounded garden. According to son David, “It was their great passion to work on that garden together and then enjoy it. Dad would sit every night and drink a martini out back in summer” beside his own comment on *The American Lawn*: a moss mound seeded with grass he trimmed with scissors. (“My father loved the moss!”) Henceforth Linda, a gifted pruner, never entered the garden unholstered.

Once, a few years post-Vietnam, she was showing a friend around the lush garden when a helicopter flew over. Her guest hit the ground, panicked. PTSD. (He’d flown helicopters in Vietnam.) Out front, Linda

lavished TLC on a beat-up street tree. She amended the soil and planted flowers – then watched as the plants were stolen, trashed. Her solution: a cautionary red colored mulch with a skull and crossbones sign: “Poison!”

The Yangs relished family summer vacations – with daughter Naomi and son David – to the exquisite Victorian castle, the Mohonk Mountain House, near New Paltz. There, John photographed the landscape and Linda chronicled the Smiley family’s gardens. (One summer, John’s idea of a really fine getaway was a six-week vacation to Iceland.)

Usually after Green Guerillas board meetings in Midtown, Linda wanted to catch a bite at one of the East Side places she and John used to frequent before his death in 2009. Late last year while the Trump impeachment hearings were underway, we stopped for dinner on East 57th. Linda effusively greeted the owner, an older Greek man, and engaged him in fond recall – only to notice during dinner that the overhead TV was tuned to Fox and Sean Hannity was praising Trump. Linda asked the waiter to please switch the channel to MSNBC or CNN. “No!” he explained, the owner “loves Trump!” We left.

A month ago this Coronavirus Spring, Lindaplants stopped emailing in any e-color. R.I.P., Lindaplants. We at MCNARGS send Pots of Love.

PATTI HAGAN



IN THIS COVIDERA, precious friends are lost to us. They were horticultural colleagues who made dents in our lives in countless ways. It strikes me that their passing should be solemnly noted and spoken of because all lives matter and we will miss their presence and impact.

Linda Yang and I were Metro Hort and MCNARGS buddies. We repaired to the Penn Club for cocktails after Rock Garden meetings. Linda made prior arrangements and could take her third drink up to her room. This was a key element to our enjoyment of the evening, as saying goodnight at the elevator, her carefully balancing her drink, I knew she would not be threading her way uptown. We were free to get Twizzled!

LYNN TORGERSON

BEFORE THE FOUR-STORY Turtle Bay townhouse with a luminous backyard and a darkroom set up in the basement for her photographer husband, Linda Yang cultivated a penthouse terrace. It overlooked 79th Street with a partial view of the East River, my best friend Mary was her gardening neighbor, and I longed for a garden. Ultimately, a signed copy of Linda’s urban classic, *The Terrace Gardener’s Handbook*, was their gift to me when I too became a rooftop gardener. Endlessly, I studied Linda’s photos and underlined her thoughts.

Our garden paths continued to cross. There were Metro Hort meetings and later, as her new life was evolving, I introduced Linda to Dave at the Chelsea Garden Center, where I shopped. And then there were all the times I encouraged Linda, to no avail, to make a presentation for MCNARGS.

But one Sunday morning, out of the blue, I received a call from Linda. She was congratulating me, but, in *sotto voce*, also sharing an awkward response. Her editor would not include Linda’s review of my very first book, *The Potted Herb*, in the 1988 *New York Times* roundup of spring garden publications, because *New York* magazine had beaten them out on deadline. Being a gardener and having worked for a daily, I understood “timing.” Still, it hurt. Certainly, Linda did not owe me an explanation, but how rare for a reporter to be so forthcoming and comforting. Linda Yang was filled with heart and sensitivity. I will miss a gardener who often signed her emails, “Pots of love.”

ABBIE ZABAR