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*When I was a little girl I'd watch my mother disappear out the back door into the garden, trowel in hand, or weird strap-on shoes with spikes on them on her feet, and I vowed there were two things I'd never do...*

One was play golf, and the other was to garden. 'Boring, boring, boring,' I'd sigh, wishing she was *inside playing with me instead.*

At twenty-one I moved into a basement flat next to the train tracks in London's Pimlico. It had a tiny brick patio that shuddered noisily every few minutes as the trains rumbled in and out of Victoria station. My neighbour, Corinne rang my doorbell one day and insisted I accompany her to the garden centre. I didn't have any interest, but even back then I had a tendency towards compulsive shopping and I found myself coming home with half a dozen terracotta pots, a couple of bags of potting soil, and trays and trays of pelargoniums and lobelia.

It was the start of one of the grand passions of my life. I became a self-professed expert on pelargoniums – would arrogantly be sent into a fury by the amateurs who called them geraniums – when in fact my knowledge extended to being able to expertly snap off the dead flowers, which I did regularly and to the irritation of many a waiter in cafés and restaurants up and down the King's Road.

My second flat was in Maida Vale. This one had a tiny south-facing

garden, with an ancient and gorgeous *Ceanothus* growing up against the old brick wall at the end. I planted hardy geraniums and hebes, *Euphorbia* and *Mahonia*, and sadly destroyed the *Clematis montana* that had spent many a happy year climbing over the fence on the side by deciding to cut back what looked to me like a big old bunch of dead wood.

I had a brief hiatus in Hampstead when I had my first child, less because I was obsessed with my child – although I have to confess I was – and more because we had made the mistake of buying a picturesque carriage house that suited our needs perfectly. Except for the north-facing garden! It was a disaster. The sun never reached the terrace and certainly never made it to the huge French doors in the living room. It always felt dark, and damp, and cold. On the other hand, the slug and snail population of North West London didn't seem to mind, and my happiest moments in that house involved putting down slug killer as I rubbed my hands together with glee.

Five years ago we left London and moved to America. My husband is a New Yorker and, I have to confess, I had always had a dream of living in the States. Connecticut was calling and we chose Westport, convinced largely by the town's own selling point as a smallish New England town that we were moving to the country.

In our three-acre garden, the English garden designer, Simon Johnson, and his protégée, the late Piers Simon (who will always be remembered by my family as 'The Lovely Piers'), created an oasis of English gardens: four huge raised beds for vegetables,

an orchard of 16 assorted fruit trees, brick walkways and arbours in the flower garden, a cherry walk, and a stone wall-edged lawn for the children's football games.

For the last two summers we have grown all our own vegetables, cooked peach and apple cobblers with our own fruit, and I have become passionate about growing food myself, enlisting the children to help: from choosing what vegetable we want to grow, to planting the seeds, to eventually picking and cooking with them. One of my greatest joys is seeing my four small children, two of whom refused to touch a vegetable, running down to pick peas and coming back to the house with a near-empty basket as all of them have been eaten on the spot.

Westport gave me a taste of what my life could be. It started me thinking about having more land, a bigger vegetable garden, a bigger orchard, chickens so we could have fresh eggs, and possibly even fresh chicken...

And so last year we moved into Middleduck Farm, a quintessential New England farmhouse, with white clapboard and dormer windows peeping out from under the eaves, nestling prettily on a quiet dirt track in the bucolic hills of Litchfield County. It is as peaceful and beautiful as I had always dreamed of and they say there's even a fabulous golf course just around the corner. Fortunately, looking after four children, writing my ninth novel, and taking care of my garden seems to keep me busy enough. Plus, I have to be honest and say that, although I was wrong about the gardening, as far as golf is concerned some things never change... »