

Celeste Dudley— Gloucester Gardening Guru

By Susan Camp

In her “Gardening Corner” article last week, Celeste Dudley announced her retirement from writing for the Gazette-Journal after 14 ½ years of fact-filled, lively columns covering every aspect of gardening and the environment. I had met Celeste at a Master Gardener meeting a few years ago, but didn’t get to know her until I began sharing the column-writing duties with her in January 2014. We get together a few times a year for coffee and muffins or zucchini bread and I have learned a great deal about this amazing lady and her jam-packed life. Celeste is intelligent, knowledgeable about gardening, a talented writer, a skilled conversationalist, and hilariously funny. In fact, her sharp wit is one characteristic that friends and colleagues always mention. Celeste has been a bundle of energy, her life filled with accomplishments as a military wife, mother and grandmother, teacher, writer, and political activist.

Several weeks ago I asked Gloucester Master Gardeners to email me comments or anecdotes about their experiences working with Celeste over the years. A number of Master Gardeners responded and I want to mention a few of their comments. I hope I haven’t left anyone out.

Noel Priseler names Celeste as her “horticultural heroine.” According to Noel, Celeste can “tell you the Latin or scientific name of a plant right off the top of her head.” Carolyn Evans echoes Noel’s statement about Celeste’s plant knowledge, adding that Celeste’s many perennials look like “hundreds of frolicking Cherubs vying for attention.” Kay Williamson remembers talking with Jim Orband, retired Gloucester and York County Extension Agent at a meeting a few years ago. He told Kay that he enjoyed reading Celeste’s columns and “considered many of them scholarly.” He added that “we were very fortunate to have such a valuable resource in our MG chapter.” Joann and Bob Gallagher note that Celeste’s “horticultural tips, always laced with history and her wonderful humor” have made the Gardening Corner a pleasure to read. Suzanne Swift writes that Celeste’s column is “a highlight of my week!” Nancy Choquette tells of a surprise birthday luncheon for Celeste several years ago. “Celeste made us all laugh with her stories and I came away feeling a bond with the other ladies.”

Bonnie Bernard sent me a two page essay on Celeste’s history with the Gloucester Master Gardeners, recalling that new interns often cited Celeste’s column as their inspiration to become Master Gardeners. Bonnie remembers with pleasure working with Celeste on many committees and Master Gardener projects. Peggy Cooney sent a testimonial from 2007 about Celeste’s contributions to Gloucester County through another organization in which she was active. Celeste has been a vital member of our community in many ways.

Celeste’s wit and sense of humor are a delight to everyone who knows her or reads her column. Felicity Rask says that “Celeste has the wonderful ability to make outrageous or provocative statements without causing offense or embarrassment.” She recalls that Celeste commented that, when answering the Master Gardener Horticultural Line telephone, Felicity’s husband, John

Ericson, spoke in a “sexy voice.” Joyce Neville remembers a discussion at a monthly Master Gardener meeting about a long term project of several years duration. Celeste, sitting at the front, “turned to the person speaking and declared she would be dead by then.” Bonnie Bernard witnessed the incident and says, “Celeste was dead serious and we all just roared.” Celeste is still with us and even though she won’t be writing a weekly column, I know she will continue to delight friends and family with facts and tales from her treasure trove of knowledge and experience.

Gazette-Journal readers will miss Celeste’s gardening column, but have no fear! All of her articles are available on the Gloucester Master Gardeners website at www.gloucesterva.info/MasterGardeners/Publications

I will continue to write the weekly Gardening Corner column. I don’t promise to know all the Latin names, but I know how to contact the lady who does. Celeste, you are a tough act to follow!

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