

## Forget Me Not Tour: In Search of a Village

I've composed for you a series of stories based on a central theme which happens to be the plant *Myosotis sylvatica*. The forget-me-not. I know it's invasive and I'm not suggesting you plant some, but in several ways, it is becoming part of my life.

It appears in my memory as a child fishing in the alder choked brook running through my grandparents Farm in rural NB. I can still picture it in my mind, like blue polka dots in a sea of green with tiny yellow eyes you have to squint to see. It appears in my garden, in fact throughout my entire yard. This year more than ever. It's invasive but it's welcome at least for now. It appears as a logo on the bright yellow shirts that I have worn almost every day, all summer and fall. Let me explain.



Every summer for the last 10 years I do a solo bicycle ride somewhere to raise awareness and a bit of money for a worthy charity. For the last two years I've been pedaling and peddling my message for the Alzheimer Society in NB and PEI.

My mom Julia faded away three years ago after being diagnosed with the disease and it opened a window on a whole new world for my family and me. We knew nothing about the symptoms, the care, or the toll it takes. The day Mom was diagnosed her life changed dramatically. She was living alone up to that point in a little house and enjoyed cooking and gardening. Her days were filled things to do and choices to make. We took the advice of the doctors and looked to find her a nursing home. Please don't misunderstand me, I don't have anything critical to say about the caregivers who work in the facilities where we send our loved ones, and I hold a great deal of admiration for families who sacrifice so much to insure their loved ones maintain a high quality of life for as long as possible.

My wife Theresa volunteers at an outreach program in our neighborhood nursing home and pays weekly visits to the Care Facility where my mom spent her last months. I have also come to know the people who work at the Alzheimer Society. I know them to be caring and open-minded and always looking toward new advancements in preventing the disease and with equal importance, in creating a high quality of life for those who must enter our nursing homes.



So in July I was in search of an activity whereby I could help raise some awareness and maybe some donations. Theresa and I met with the executive director of the Alzheimer Society of New Brunswick at their office in Fredericton. Jim, the owner of their building was there and during the course of the conversation I learned of a "Dementia Village" that was soon to open in Langley, BC. It was inspired and patterned after De Hogewijk in Weesp, near Amsterdam. That was it for me. I just happened to have meetings in Abbotsford so I borrowed a bicycle and pushed off from there to Langley.

Next I booked a flight to Brussels to cycle to Weesp and added a few hundred kilometers by cycling PEI and included Saint John to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia to attend the communities in bloom conference and awards. In total I was planning to travel 2000 Kilometers and raise a bit of awareness and money in the process.

I consider myself blessed, that, at 60+ years old I have the health, the wealth, the time and the understanding attitude of my wife, that allows me to sit myself upon my bicycle and travel about. Please don't picture me as a cyclist. I don't match the image. My chicken type legs have never seen the sun, nor has spandex ever been in contact with my skin. The vision I want you to have is more that of a hobo... on a bicycle... with a credit card. I'm slow.

Even though I enjoy cycling just for the sake of cycling, I extract even more pleasure if my travels have a purpose. A reason to go from point B to point A. My September "Forget-me-not tour," provided all of that.

Plus, I love visiting the lowlands of Europe, and would suggest that anyone who toils in the plant profession should go there at least once.

The first stop on my journey from Brussels to Amsterdam was Zundert in Brabant province near the Belgian border. Although I was familiar with the area near Boskoop, which is a bit further north and known as European (perhaps the world) centre of landscape horticulture, I discovered Zundert is not far behind. The countryside is dotted with nurseries and most of the residents are growers. I cycled past many nurseries and greenhouse operations during my 10 days in the Netherlands. In Zundert, I watched the kindercorso or childrens flower parade. Hundreds of floats built and pushed through the streets by more than a thousand children. Talk about connecting children to plants. I also learned that two weeks before, the Corso took place. It is the worlds biggest flower parade going back to 1939. The population is less than twenty five thousand. Do yourself a favour and google the town and the parade.



I'll cycle back to horticulture during my closing argument, but I want to explain the concept of the village(s). In Langley the villagers live in houses that are settled into a residential area just south of the City, on the site of a former school. Food is prepared in their houses and they can go outside to tend the garden if they take the urge. There is a barn with animals (they had not arrived yet when I visited). There is a restaurant and a pub/café on site as well as a place for visiting families to spend a few nights. It makes for a more comfortable transition for those who need care.

At Veesp's Vivium Hogewey it is a bit different. It is very much like any dutch town. Within the confines of the facility, there is a barber shop, a music venue, large restaurant. It is very hard to distinguish the difference between what is inside the walls from what is outside. I arrived at noon, parked my bicycle, went inside and asked at reception if I could go inside and look around. "I'm sorry but no". I anticipated this, as I was told that tours needed to be scheduled in advance. Due to the fact I was cycling, I was not sure when I might arrive, so I didn't heed the advice. I could come back in a few days. That was my backup plan. Tours needed to be booked about three weeks in advance. I said that I understood, for this was where people lived, not a tourist attraction. Truly, I was just happy to have made the journey. It gave me and my forget me not tour purpose. I had struck out in search of a village, and found it. The gentleman standing with me in reception was Eloy, facility manager and founder of the village. Serendipitously, my mom had placed him in the room with me. He explained further why I could not come in and I told him I understood completely,



and I was not upset in the least. We then spent the next hour and a half guiding me through the streets, the shops, the history and the future plans to take this model throughout the world. Eloy used one word to describe what they were trying to achieve. Deinstitutionalization. Think about that for a moment. Do you or anyone you know want to be institution? They achieve this by allowing meals to be cooked in the residences, by having pets on the property, by allowing the residents to dig in the earth and plant and harvest crops, by giving them choices on

the live music or the conversations they might enjoy. There are nurses and qualified caregivers present, but they just blended in with the crowd. There was laundry being done, but in the homes, in the background.

As participants in the landscape profession, we understand the satisfaction that comes with being connected to the soil, taking risks and to solving problems that mitigate those risks. The longer we can keep those tools sharp, the higher the quality of our lives will be. Let's continue our collective efforts to introduce future generations to nature and to plants. Show them the satisfaction that comes from being productive and hope that they are provided the opportunity right through to the end.

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