

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 422-032**  
**Interviewee: Roberta Stroden**  
**Interviewer: Suzanne Vernon**  
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Suzanne Vernon: It's August 16, 1999. Today, I'll be interviewing Roberta Stroden, and we'll be talking about gardening in the Swan Valley. She recently completed the master gardener course at the county extension office.

How long have you been a gardener?

Roberta Stroden: Since about 1985. I started in 1985 in upstate New York.

SV: [unintelligible]? Had you had the house built?

RS: Yeah, a little bit because I lived in the city all my life. I lived in New York City for 20 years, and then I just got this desire to live closer to the land and to experience a more natural lifestyle and live with the natural cycles. That led me to buy a farm in upstate New York. [laughs] I didn't farm, but it was a farm nevertheless and I started gardening at that point.

Interestingly enough I purchased my first seeds from Garden City Seeds in Victor, Montana, because they were supposedly cold hardy and I was interested in open-pollinated seeds so that I could save seed. I literally went out into the garden with their catalog—and they have very good instructions on how to plant and how to save seed—and I had that thing in my hand and I went out there and I read. I said, “okay,” and I put the seeds down. They were very instrumental in helping me to learn how to garden.

SV: When you moved up here—

RS: Well, interesting, early on the few people that I talked to about gardening here said, “Oh, you can't garden here. The weather is too cold, and it's not good.” Gardening here has been a terrific experience. Everything grows wonderful. I came to the conclusion very early on that I was only going to really bother with growing what grows, not spend a tremendous amount of energy in trying to produce vegetables and flowers that require a lot of intensive care because they're not suited to the climate particularly. Like tomatoes, for instance, which I find not worth the effort anymore.

SV: So what does grow here? What did you find?

RS: The usual things like carrots and onions and any of the cole crops and all the root crops. Squash, like zucchini and so forth. Winter squash I haven't been successful with. There is somebody who lives up Fatty Creek who does a good job with winter squash. But right here in

my location that doesn't happen. I've tried it numerous times, and it doesn't happen. Asparagus and peas and potatoes and onions, if I said that, and garlic grows wonderful. Oh super good. Better than I had in my past experience any place else.

SV: Any particular variety?

RS: I grow a variety called venchillian (?) which I got from Garden City Seeds originally. I just bought a group, but now every time I harvest I reserve the best and replant. I save a lot of seed as well. As a matter of fact I'd say, oh, a large part of the garden—maybe half of it or maybe even a little more—reseeds itself or regenerates itself in some form because I don't follow the popular garden wisdom which says deadhead everything and get rid of the seed. I let everything go to seed—most everything go to seed anyway. Most all of my strong leafy greens come back. I don't replant them. All I do is manage it. If it pops up in a big cluster somewhere, I'll take out the little transplants, and I'll move them somewhere. I find the little seedlings that grow that way are stronger and more prolific than ones that I start myself indoors and transplant out. So that's worked out. I concentrate to a large extent, not exclusively but to a large extent, on open-pollinated seed when I buy seed so that I have that option. So that when it does recede or I do save seed, I will be able to reproduce true. I'm a very enthusiastic seed saver. Of course, the seeds that I save...early on when I started doing that I didn't have confidence in it, and I kept buying new seeds as well. Then I began to notice that the seeds I was saving were better than the ones I was purchasing because they were becoming acclimated. That worked out really well too.

SV: Some of them you let go to seed?

RS: Yes.

SV: And the seed just scatters in the bed, but some of them you collect and save in the house.

RS: Yes, I do both generally with most everything.

SV: How do you store the ones [unintelligible]?

RS: I'm pretty low tech as far as that's concerned. I go out there and when I see that the seed heads are dry, and hopefully I can still identify what it is—sometimes that's a challenge because I'm not real conscientious about marking things—and I'll just take the seed heads and I'll stick them upside down in a brown paper bag. I have these, just little wire shower curtain hooks and I'll stick one through there, and I just hang them all up. I have them on my back porch or in the barn. Then in the wintertime or early spring when I get around to it, I'll go and clean them all up, and get the seeds cleaned out.

SV: So is temperature where the seed is stored, is that a critical factor?

RS: It doesn't seem to be. I've heard store and dry cool and so forth. But I have my seeds. They'll be there so obviously they're freezing in the wintertime when they're in the barn and my back porch freezes. I guess it's okay. I've never been particularly careful about that. I mean I don't let them get wet by any means, but other than that, I don't take any particular care with them. I've had good success with saving seeds.

SV: Maybe heat is more damaging than cold?

RS: Maybe.

SV: I see purple peas.

RS: Yeah, those are a variety from Holland, and I can't pronounce the name. [unintelligible], something like that. I don't can't speak Dutch so I don't know how it's pronounced particularly. The original seed I got about a good ten years ago, at least, maybe more, and it's say it's a variety that's grown for soup. I let it dry on the vine, and I'll pick the pods when they're good and dry. I just throw them all in a pillowcase and then save them. Again, in the wintertime when I have the time, I clean them out. They're very, very productive. When I grew them back East, they grew about three feet tall, and here they grow seven feet tall easily. They're also beautiful because the blossoms are purple as well as the pods being purple. They produce a very kind of a grayish colored dry pea, and it makes a brownish kind of soup that's more like a—

SV: Like a split pea soup?

RS: No, it's more like a bean soup. It's wonderful because when I came here I wasn't able to grow the kinds of beans that you grow for drying because most of them are a runner type of bean, and our season isn't long enough and I was frustrated because I no longer had all these wonderful beans. But this is the substitute. This is my Swan Valley bean. [laughs]

SV: So this is the one dry bean. Any other dry beans?

RS: That's the only one that I do. I've experimented with others, and I haven't gotten too much success because most of them, like I said, are a runner bean and the season requirements are a little longer than we have. So that hasn't worked out too well. Maybe somebody else in the valley, because we have microclimates and it's different from garden to garden as to what you can do. But in this particular spot—I'm in a bit of a low spot, and I get some cold sink here and that hasn't worked out. So I just forget about it. That's good enough, and I'm happy.

SV: It's interesting that you talk about the microclimates because in interviewing the homestead families, that made such a huge difference for them. One person might be able to have apple trees and apples every year. Just the next range over, their trees never blossomed.

RS: Yeah, I can feel the temperature difference when I walk from here up to the top of my driveway. I notice the difference. If I was up there, I'd probably have a different kind of garden because of the difference in the temperature. But here we're getting really down pretty low. I mean the river's right out there so we're down about as low as we can get.

SV: When people talk about having 30 frost-free days, do we ever have? Have you noticed that we ever had 30 frost-free days in a row?

RS: Oh yeah. I think we have even more, but it varies. That's the difference. I don't think we had a frost last year until maybe October. Or I didn't at any rate. Now when I gardened back East, I never got past Labor Day without a frost. It was a very, very clear...I mean, there would be exceptions, of course, but there was a very clear frost free season. But here I would be hard pressed to tell you what that is. I know darn well that you are rarely ever going to have no frost before June 1, and even after June 1, you're probably going to get some. But as far as on the other end of the season, it varies tremendously. That's been my experience anyway. It could happen anytime because I know that the year that we came here there was snow in August the 16th. That was obviously a frost. [laughs]

SV: Do you have to cover stuff in plastic?

RS: Earlier on, I did a lot of that. I was covering and uncovering in the early part of the season particularly. I kind of got tired of it, and now I'm planting things like the cold-sensitive annual flowers. I'm planting those in containers in large attractive flower pots. Then I have them on the porch, and if it's going to be cold and I know it and I drag them inside. Then I don't put them out into the garden until I'm really sure that the weather is settled. They stay in the containers then. That's how I deal with it. I've also cut back on the number of frost-sensitive annuals, and I'm developing more perennials. Just my few favorites I'm putting out now. I'm kind of letting it go because it gets too labor intensive and then it gets not to be fun. Gardening is something that I love, and I don't want it to be such a dreadful chore that I don't enjoy it anymore.

So that's what I'm doing. I'm gradually fine tuning as I go along, and I understand what I'm dealing with more and more so that it's less work. In the early part of the season, I spend a lot of time in the garden, and in the summertime, I don't spend that much in terms of doing work in there. I pull out gobs of extra plants and compost them, but I don't do a whole lot other than that. Because once the plants are established, the weeds are not a problem anymore. The weeds are only a problem early on when the seedlings are too tiny to fight them off.

SV: So what's a typical day in the early part of the season? A lot of weeding?

RS: Planting, moving things around. When I find all of these the volunteers, which are everywhere and they're not where I want them, I'll move them to where I want them, or if there's them and I want to plant something else there, I take them out. Mainly, it's getting the garden established. That would be rearranging things and planting new things, putting in seed

and setting out transplants and so forth and putting compost on the garden or manure or whatever that I might have.

SV: Is that what you use mostly besides [unintelligible]?

RS: Yeah. That's all I use. Basically all of the garden is pretty much raised beds, and my raised beds—the soil in the raised beds consists about 90 percent, I would say, of old rotted manure of some kind which I've gotten from various people around who have horses and so forth. I had an experience that I'd urge everybody to kind of pay attention to. When you go and gather manure, find out if there has been any spraying on the fields of something such as Tordon, which I unknowingly gathered one time. I got some manure from a ranch, and I noticed this very awful, stunted, mutated plants coming out, and I didn't understand. [laughs] I did some research and found out that that's what it was. So you have to ask that question all the time, where it comes from.

SV: Just so the manure...after you've asked the questions about spraying and whatnot, just so of manure is starting to decompose, it's already starting to compost.

RS: Yeah, yeah. If it's fresh. If somebody has fresh manure, I take it, and I just let it hang around until next year which is never a problem. I compost because I have huge amounts of green material out of there, and there's all the kitchen scraps and so forth. So composting is pretty easy to do.

SV: Any special techniques for composting?

RS: No, I don't. I have one bin now. I had three before. I prefer the three bin method. Basically what I've done, is I just put those basic metal plant stakes...fence stakes in the ground and wrap chicken wire around it to contain the materials. I try to pile it in in some kind of an order as recommended, but that doesn't always happen. I don't generally have the time to turn it and so forth, which is more desirable, but it doesn't happen. I'm glad if I go in with a piece of rebar and poke holes in it to get some aeration, but that's the best I can do. But it works.

SV: From fall to spring, then, it's composted pretty well?

RS: It's usually a year before I use it. When I had the three bins—it's just because I started this addition, I had to move it and I only have one now. But when I had the three bins, I would toss them from bin to bin as it went along, and then use the oldest one obviously to put on the garden. That's why I don't use any fertilizer, and I don't use any chemicals or any kind of weed control. I have what I consider a natural garden. I read a book a long time ago called *The Natural Way of Farming* by Masanobu Fukuoka, and he discusses quite a lot about cooperating, as opposed to controlling. I kind of follow those principles. I don't get all bent out of shape when something happens. I have a gazillion slugs. I have a real hard time killing stuff even a slug. So I kind of decide that I'm going to coexist with these creatures, and it works out okay.

Stuff gets eaten and sometimes some things don't grow for one reason or another, but I find every year I have plenty of stuff. It's never like, 'oh my god, I have no food because something came and eat everything.' Of course, the deer would do it. A deer fence is an absolute must, at least in my yard. [laughs] I know that there would be no garden if there wasn't a deer fence.

SV: But the slugs aren't destroying stuff?

RS: Well, there's a million of them. I mean, there is literally a million of them. I can go out there in the evening, and I could gather pails full. That's how many there are but. Then I have this dilemma as what am I going to do with them. I can't drown them. I can't. People say all kinds of things about putting them in vinegar, putting salt. I can't do it. I just can't do it, and so I have to make a choice and say, "Well, all right here they are and they're going to be there and that's it." Obviously, they haven't ruined the garden. There are things like I don't plant cauliflower anymore because they totally love it, and there's no use. Although I guess it would be a good trap plant if I wanted to kind of divert them from something else. I just leave them alone. I haven't had any major pest devastation here. I think because we're not in a real agricultural area that's not a real problem. I don't have too many problems.

SV: What about, there's those little green worms that get on cabbage?

RS: Yeah, yeah. I have them. They get on and they eat stuff, but they don't destroy it. I mean everything is there. They'll eat the outer leaves of the cabbage and they'll get in there, and I just deal with it, that's all. They're not denying me anything so I figured well all right. They're not eating that much.

SV: How much of your food then comes from the garden if you can guess?

RS: Actually, it depends upon the time that I have to put it up. I'd say 50 percent. Most of my vegetables that I put up last me until January or February or so. I produce enough carrots and beets and parsnips and cabbage and greens—I produce enough greens that take me pretty much all year. I have this little kind of cold-frame greenhouse thing over here, and I put down seed for strong greens and lettuces in the fall and they start up all by themselves when they know it's the right time.

SV: In the spring?

RS: Yeah, it's spring. It's usually the end of February and March that I start getting things out of there, and that's almost no effort. That is virtually no effort. I just throw the seed down, or I let it go to seed which it's doing right now. It's all going to seed in there so whatever's in there is going to be there again in the spring.

SV: What's in there?

RS: There's a lot of things in there. Right now there's a lot of mustards and there's some lettuces and kale. Kale is my number one, top-notch green vegetable. I love it, and it's prolific. It's loaded with vitamins and all sorts of good things. That's a star as far as I'm concerned. It reseeds all over. I have one variety. I grow two varieties, but one of them usually something manages to live through the winter and come back next year and go to seed for me, and that's a variety called Red Russian. It's also called Ragged Jack. That's another name I've come across for the same type. I collect seed for that too, and I give it out I give out seeds for greens to people as much as possible because I think it's a very vital plant and very good for everyone's health. [laughs]

SV: I haven't asked [unintelligible]. They grew chard.

RS: Yeah, I grow Swiss chard. I have another wonderful vegetable, which the original seeds, my original seeds, I got from Garden City Seeds, and actually when I came cross-country I brought my seeds with me too. But the original ones I did get from Garden City Seeds I started growing it back East. Apparently according to the information in the catalog, they collected it from an old homestead in Montana originally. So that's been cross country and back again.

SV: Which seed?

RS: It's called red orach and it's in the lamb's quarter family. It grows like crazy. It's very, very good when it's young in salads, and it also cooks up very nicely. Similar to spinach. A little bit heartier than spinach I would say but very much like it. Oh, it's wonderful. It's wonderful. Really, really good. So I put some of that up as well. I generally—

SV: You freeze it?

RS: I freeze it, yeah, and I also dry greens. I don't do that on a large scale at this point, but it's kind of a skill that I was interested in having just in case I ever needed to when freezing may not be an option. It's very easy to do so I do that. I've kind of practiced all my drying skills so I've tried all kinds of things carrots and onions and peppers and greens and so forth.

SV: Just like in a solar dryer?

RS: Again, I'm pretty low tech. I don't have any specific dryer. I just have a back porch, which has a kind of a greenhouse-type roof on it. I just blanch the things and either lay it out on a screen, or I put it in a brown paper bag and I just let it dry naturally. Works really well. I dry herbs, lots of herbs, for winter use. I don't buy herbs anymore. I have everything I need—parsley and I dry celery leaves and basil. Basil I grow inside on the back porch. I haven't had success with that here. It always gets black spots on it and so forth. It doesn't grow for me in this spot. It's very cold sensitive. It likes heat.

SV: Celery leaves. Not celery, but celery leaves.

RS: No, I do the leaves. Yeah, yeah. Quite a large volume of them, and I pretty much throw that in everything I cook.

SV: So you get all the flavor.

RS: [unintelligible] No, she won't move. She has to be in the middle of everything. [referring to an animal?]

SV: I'm trying to think what other crops we didn't talk about. What about oregano?

RS: Yes, I grow oregano. I grow a Greek oregano. It doesn't survive the winter so I do it every year. When my house is larger, I'm going to be bringing more of these plants inside to winter over, which I do my rosemary. That comes in because that won't survive here.

SV: [unintelligible].

RS: Yeah, well, Greek oregano. Regular oregano, common oregano comes up. I have that over there. The deer like it quite a lot, but I don't care. I let them eat it. Greek oregano is not quite as hardy, and it hasn't survived for me, anyway, so I do that.

SV: Thyme? Do you grow thyme?

RS: Yes, I grow thyme. That survives most of the time. Sometimes, you'll get a winter kill, but generally it survives. Lavender. I have a variety called lavender Munstead, and that survives most of the time. Parsley will frequently winter over, and then go to seed the next year.

SV: What about medicinal herbs?

RS: I don't use them, but I have some. I have feverfew. What else have I got out there? I can't offhand think what I have.

SV: There's a big interest in Echinacea.

RS: I have that, yes.

SV: Does that grow?

RS: Oh yes. Very well. Winters over. It's a wonderful perennial. It's not a problem at all. It grows just fine.

SV: You said garlic earlier.

RS: Yes, garlic is fabulous. I never had garlic grow back East the way it grows here. I get beautiful, gorgeous bulbs. I used to get these little puny things all the time. Was very frustrating, but wonderful. I grow a whole bed of it. I'm a huge garlic fan and I braid up the braids and everything, and I take five pounds of the best to save to put back. I usually harvest late August or so, and I replant in the beginning of October. It's very, very successful. It requires no care. It just grows beautiful.

SV: [unintelligible].

RS: It varies. I have some that are 16 inches deep, and some of them are maybe eight or nine inches deep. Then some of them which appear to be at ground level, I've actually excavated and put in what I call good dirt, because this soil, I think I think you could amend this for 20 years and it's still...Well, maybe it would be okay, but mine particularly is very, very rocky and doesn't have much organic matter in it.

SV: I think that's a good description.

RS: Yeah. With the availability of horse manure here, and you just need some rocks or some boards which is all my raised beds are made of. You just get horse manure or cow manure or now there's llamas and whatever. It's certainly abundant. So there's really no trick. It's easy to garden. Very easy to garden. Easy to grow food for yourself.

SV: If somebody just moved here and they've got a little bit of land to work with, just fair ground, gravelly looking stuff, where do they start? I mean obviously a fence.

RS: Yeah. A fence is real important, and my fence costs me virtually nothing. My fence cost me the cost of the chicken wire. I have a six foot-fence and I went out and there was a...I don't know what they what they would call it. They took down a bunch of little trees up on Glacier Creek Road some years ago, and they just left them all there. I just went up there with my truck, and I picked them up. I limbed them there, and then I loaded them on my truck. I came home, I peeled them, dug holes, and stuck them in the ground. There it is. This is the third fence. My fence, it rots. It lasts about five years. But if I maybe put them in concrete or something it might last a little longer, but it's no big deal. I used to two-inch chicken wire which is less expensive than one inch, and it's also less visible. I find it a lot more attractive, and it does the job just fine. I don't have a particular problem with rodent-type things in the garden. Not rabbits or...sometimes is a little bit of mouse or vole damage, but not too much.

The deer are really the only pests, or you know if you want to call...In relation to the garden, they're the only pests that I feel I have to contend with because your garden simply won't exist. I've been experimenting little by little and finding the things that they won't bother, either absolutely never touch or they won't generally won't bother, and I've been getting that out in my landscape little by little. It's developing where I have something a little bit attractive outside the fence as well, so that's coming along.

SV: They're not even [unintelligible]?

RS: Well, I keep wire. They will, but when it's up to a certain point, they seem to be kind of lazy. They won't put their heads up too high, I guess. They only go for what's right at their browsing level. I mainly we have the wire around the base of the trees for two reasons. In case any bucks come and they want to rub, and also my cats will claw the young tree trunks. They actually did kill a tree, which I didn't realize it was happening. They'll use it for scratching post so that's as much for them as anything. No, the deer don't bother the trees when they get up that high. If the branches are down low, they'll eat that stuff off.

SV: What kinds of flowers have you got out here?

RS: I have monk's hood, foxglove, irises. The irises, they'll build nibble on in the spring, and then there's tons of wild daisies which I wouldn't recommend anybody bring those into their garden. I made that mistake. I said, "Oh, aren't these beautiful?" I started planting—

[Break in audio]

RS: —although Jerry next door has them eating here. Yarrow, I have different kinds of. Yarrow.

Yellow and some pretty reds and pinks and so forth, and the cultivated yarrows, they will eat a little bit but not too much.

SV: [unintelligible]?

RS: Spirea hasn't worked for me. They've eaten that. I had to finally put mine inside the fence because they ate it down to a nub all the time. So that didn't work for me. Other people say ye, but that hasn't worked for me. That hasn't been my experience. I'm have peony. Foxglove is one of my favorites, and I let that get around quite a lot. It reseeds vigorously, and I dig up the little transplants and move them around to places that I like to have them. They don't bother lavender. The mints, they'll eat them a little bit, but generally late in the season they'll go for those. By that time, it's like I don't care. It's okay; they can have them. [laughs] I don't worry about it.

SV: Sounds good to me. What about Columbine?

RS: Yes, they bother it a little bit. I have the patch over there, and they seem to like to browse that spot. I have some over here and they don't bother them there. So who can say? I don't know. Yeah, but I have that too, and that's worked out real well.

SV: You mentioned a couple of his favorite vegetables. Any other favorite vegetables? It's kind of hard to think of one.

RS: Yeah, I don't have a favorite. Kale is probably my number one, but I love everything. I love the way peas grow here so I grow large quantities. As much as I can possibly fit in I grow of peas.

SV: Just the kind that you shell or—

RS: I grow sugar snaps, and then I grow a variety called Night, which I totally love. They have very large pods, about ten peas to a pod. Supposedly the catalogs claim they don't need staking, but that hasn't been my experience. They grow about four feet high, and I do put up trellis thing for them. Those I blanch and freeze. Then I grow these Dutch peas which... [unintelligible] or whatever they're called for soup. I save seed for all of them. I don't buy seed for peas anymore. I just save it and replant every year. Sunflowers grow well, and I don't plant those anymore because they seem to reseed and grow just fine. All my sunflowers this year are all volunteers. That one is the really good one, and then there's a bunch over there. I grow—

SV: Do you eat the sunflower seeds, or are they for the birds?

RS: I don't feed wild critters at all. Not even hummingbirds. I have tons of flowers, and they seem to be perfectly happy. I have lots and lots of hummingbirds here and other birds. No, I don't feed them. Whatever happens and spreads around, they're always welcome to have. But I don't specifically do that. I grow the sunflowers mostly because I just like them. I found it tedious to grow them for food, because I haven't come across some kind of a device that will shell them for me. Maybe there is one, but I'm not aware of it. So they're a little bit tedious. No, I don't. I gather them sometimes, but these days I don't. I just generally let them go to seed and spread around and whatever happens, happens.

SV: What are the dark purple?

RS: Those are hollyhocks. The tall? Those are hollyhocks, and to the best of my knowledge, I didn't plant those. I planted black hollyhocks of a single variety, and those are doubles and I don't know how they got here—whether they hybridized by themselves. Because I've had doubles of other colors but never the blacks, and they were definitely volunteers. I don't know, but I'm very, very happy with them and I'm definitely going to save seed from those this year and also make sure that the seed falls. That's what I do a lot, too, is in the fall I'll notice the seeds are dry, and I'll take them somewhere and just put them down in the spot where I want them to be.

SV: Do you have to mulch or anything over the top? How do you—

RS: Well, nature just drops the seed on the ground, and so that seems to work just fine. I don't figure I can improve on that. So that's what happens, I just do that. I let it fall where it may, and if it grows, it grows. See, those very pretty pink flowers, kind of right past the gate? That's

godetia, and it's an annual. A friend of mine Dawn Bishop, as a matter of fact, was the person that gave me a little paper cup with these couple little strings in it about four years ago, and I put them in the garden and I've never had to plant them again. They just grew and they reseed, and there they are.

SV: They bloom [unintelligible]?

RS: Yeah, they probably started to bloom about maybe four or five weeks ago. You know, a month ago. They're still going strong right now. They'll probably start to produce seed pods pretty soon, or they probably already are but they're still looking real good so far.

SV: It just looks like you've broken all the rules.

RS: Well, I don't know. [laughs]

SV: Whose rules?

RS: Yeah, right. Whose rules? I was really heavily influenced by that book. Also I read another book years ago called *The Magic of Findhorn*, which was written by Paul Hawken. I tend to believe in the spirituality of the garden. It exists. I know it exists. Whether anybody believes it or not is something else, but I know it exists. You can't garden from someplace else. At least in my opinion, you can't just put your stuff out and turn on an automatic sprinkler and expect to have a garden. It requires attention. It requires the relationship between the person and the plants. That's what gardening is as far as I'm concerned anyway. That's what it requires. I love it, and I think that's an important element to what makes a garden be happy. To me it's a symphony. I walk out here, and I say, "It's singing. It is singing." [laughs]

SV: Everything is so close together. The old farmer would say, "No, it needs to be in rows," but it seems to be just fine.

RS: No, it does for me. My gardening is very intense. Lots of what's in-between is what would technically be called weeds. A particularly prolific weed that I have in there is called chickweed, which is also edible. A lot of the weeds that appear in the garden are edible, wild edibles, and I do take advantage of those. I'll eat those wild mustards and chickweed, for instance. My beds are pretty deep, which means they can support close spacing. It eliminates a lot of weeds later on when the plants get large, and it also prevents dehydration in the dry season to a larger extent. It helps a lot with that. I also interplant in vegetables and flowers because I believe—to me, to my eye—vegetables are as beautiful as flowers, and I like the relationship out there. See, I don't know if you can notice it over there, right behind the pink geraniums, there's kind of a blue-green looking plant. That's an Italian variety of kale. To me that's a really, really beautiful plant, and I always put it in with flowers because I like that relationship. I like the color, and I like the texture of it a lot. Red cabbage, I grow this giant variety called mammoth red rock, and I think that is a gorgeous plant. Beautiful. When it rains, it gets these large beads of water,

there'll be about a half inch diameter and they look like giant glass beads on there. It's just breathtaking. So beautiful.

Lupine, lupine is another beauty. I love it. The cultivated variety has to be inside the fence because the deer eat that quite vigorously.

SV: Lots of colors on it too.

RS: Yeah, yeah. They're all gone now, but in the early part of the season they're just outstanding.

SV: What about bulbs for the spring bulbs?

RS: I don't have lots. I have a lot of lilies—not a lot, but I have a good amount of lilies. They're all pretty much finished right now. The last ones just finished about a week ago. I have quite a lot of daffodils out here, which the deer never bother those. I have a few tulips which are inside. Then I have some crocuses, and they haven't bothered those either. They're out here. But that's about it for bulbs, I think. I don't think I have any other bulb types.

SV: There's so much in there. Have you ever take an account on how many varieties of flowers and vegetables?

RS: No, no, I haven't.

SV: How often do you find new things that you want to try?

RS: Well, a lot, but I'm...I try new things all the time, but I also stay with certain things that have proven successful. Once I discover...I'll try a lot of different varieties until I discover the one that's going to work the best, and then I'll kind of stick with it. I used to grow a second, well, a third variety of kale, actually, called Harvester. It did very well and it's a very attractive plant as well, but it wasn't quite as hardy as the Red Russian and it didn't have quite as good a flavor so I just said, "Well okay, I don't need it anymore," and I let it go. The garden isn't really huge, and I wanted to produce as wide a variety as I can get. So if something is only marginal, I'll let it go.

SV: What about potatoes? Your statement reminding [unintelligible] because their seasons vary so much [unintelligible].

RS: I grow...What's my white potato? I grow Yukon Gold, I think. I usually grow one yellow-flesh variety, and I grow one red-skin variety. I don't generally grow bakers because I don't generally eat bakers. I tend to like steamed potatoes. I like the new potato varieties. That's what I usually grow. I have a little problem occasionally with scab. So for that reason, I don't save my own potatoes to regrow, which I used to do when I gardened back East but I don't do that here because of that. I buy new ones every year and that does okay.

SV: Would you say that's a common problem around here?

RS: I don't know that. I don't know that. It could be. I don't know that though actually.

SV: What about parsnips.

RS: I grow parsnips, and I don't plant them anymore. They reseed and volunteer now pretty nicely. I leave some in the ground. Either deliberately or inadvertently, I leave some in the ground, and they'll come up the next year. Then they go to seed, and the seed throws itself all over and then they pop up. So I either leave them where they are. I thin them or I move them, whatever, but I don't have to plant them any longer.

SV: Do you let the snow insulate anything to eat in the spring?

RS: No, I haven't done that. I haven't done that. I suppose that could work. What I leave in the ground I generally leave so that it will produce seed the next year. But I know that lots of people do that, particularly with parsnips and carrots and so forth. But I have never done that. It's usually pretty...it's pretty tough getting in there anyway. [laughs] There's a lot of snow. Can't open the gate. Three years ago I could've walked over the top of the fence probably, but the snow was high enough.

SV: Have there been any major disappointments for you [unintelligible]?

RS: No, I wouldn't say I've had major disappointments because if something is too labor intensive, I just let it go. I don't see any reason. I don't really have an attachment to having exotic varieties of anything. For me, if it's beautiful enough and it's productive enough, it isn't important to me that I have something that's a rare species of anything. So if it's not compatible with this climate and I discover that, I let it go because I don't want to be a slave. Like I said, I want to enjoy it.

SV: How much time do you have to spend in the garden now, this time of year?

RS: At this time of year, the main focus is harvesting and watering. Of course, beautifully, the last week or so, I haven't had to do much watering. In the hot, dry season, like in July, I water every other day, and I hand water. If I'm really super busy and working so much, I'll set up a sprinkler—a regular lawn sprinkler on top of a little stepladder so that it shoots over the top—and that'll get me by in the interim. But I like to hand water because I know what everything is getting, because I find any automatic sprinklers tend to be deficient in terms of what they get. They'll either not water enough or too much in certain areas. Then you rely on it, and then you go over there and you'll see something's either drowning or it's dry because it's not getting the water it needs.

SV: How much time do you spend every day, could you say? Hours?

RS: Some days not any time at all. Like I said, it varies with the time of year. In the spring, I'll be in the garden every day all day as much as I can when I'm not doing something else. At this time of year, I'll go out and just meander around. That's another reason I like to hand water as well, because then I get to visit everything and I see what's happening and what it's doing and how it's looking and who's new and that kind of thing.

SV: Do you cut flowers then for bouquets?

RS: Yeah, yeah. I had little six-year-old girl here yesterday, who went in and she gathered a bouquet for herself. She was so happy.

SV: Good for the spirit.

RS: Yes. The whole experience is good for the spirit. There's no doubt about that—at least for me it is. It's a place where I feel peaceful and everything is beautiful, and I feel totally in touch with the higher power. Because regardless of how people perceive what a gardener is, you're not doing it. You're cooperating and you're helping out, but you're not doing it. It's coming from someplace else. So that makes me happy because when I get out in the world in the day to day, I forget sometimes. [laughs]

SV: You work full time in addition.

RS: Well, I don't work full time, but yeah I work. In the summertime, I work a lot, yeah. In the wintertime, not so much.

SV: If we write this up for an article, somebody might think, 'well, she's retired.'

RS: No, no. No, no. No, no. No. I support myself. [laughs] I support myself 100 percent. There's no one else doing it for me so it's totally possible. It's about getting a balance in the gardening and cooperating and allowing it to do what it does and not spending a tremendous amount of time trying to combat these perceived enemies in the garden. I learned that a long time ago that there is a reason for a lot of things and to cooperate and to allow things and not to panic when something is happening tends to work itself out. The garden seems to be bearing that out as being the truth because it's working for me. I never spend so much time in the garden that it becomes a chore, where I say, "Oh my god, there's so much work, and I don't want to do it." That has never happened. It's never happened.

SV: Do you have any berries?

RS: No. No, I don't. I have just one apple tree, which I put in last year, which I'm very delighted has nine apples on it. [laughs] I don't feel like I have enough space. Strawberries take a lot of

room. I'd love to have them, and raspberries I wouldn't dare put in there. I'd have to put them somewhere else because they are so aggressive. They need to be fenced because the deer do eat them, or at least they will here. But they send out these runners, and they just go all over the place so I wouldn't even consider doing that, putting them in there. So that's it. Blueberries I don't...I think you might be able to find some special varieties that would grow here, but I don't really know. I haven't tried that out. I don't know any other berries that would grow, besides the strawberries and raspberries. Raspberries grow real well. But I think someday I'll create a little separate spot with another fence and put them out someplace. I want to put in more fruit trees too. Apple trees probably mostly, because this one's doing real well. I think I'll do that.

SV: What about lilacs?

RS: Actually, I do have one someplace. I can't find it. It's a new little guy, but I think I need to take it out of the garden, because I think they get pretty aggressive. But Jerry has beautiful lilac bushes, and because our gardens are back to back, it's almost like experiencing it. She has them over there, so I get to experience lilacs all the time every year so that makes me happy.

SV: I'm trying to think of the old varieties that you see around the old homesteads. Narcissus, I guess. Siberian iris. Some of those older ones tend to be around.

RS: You're talking—

SV: Daffodils.

RS: Oh, yeah. I have some white daffodils. I don't know specifically the name. I think the yellow ones that I have are that very common variety called King Alfred. I have some of those, and then I've got some that—and I don't know the names of any of them unfortunately—very, very pretty with white petals and an orange center. They're just beautiful. Then some little tiny white ones. Quite a nice selection, but I don't know the names of them other than that one.

SV: When I've wandered around at some of the older gardens, there's a lot of hops.

RS: Oh, I don't know what hops look like so I have no idea.

SV: I keep asking people. One of these days, I'm going to find out why so many hops in this valley around the old buildings. They've just got a real broad leaf [unintelligible] in the fall. Large flowers. I think they're white. They're vines, and they take over the sides of woodsheds and houses. A lot of shade, actually.

RS: Something that sounds like what you're describing was growing on the back of my house at one time, but I thought it was something else. Maybe that's what it was.

SV: Well, the sun's out from...Well, let me look at my questions. I had written down what are the easiest things to grow and the hardest things to grow in. It sounds like you've found a happy medium, where there's neither hardest or easiest. It's all compatible.

RS: Well, everything I'm growing is easy as far as I'm concerned, because I got rid of the labor-intensive stuff. I just don't want to deal with it. How good can it get? [laughs]

SV: You went through the master gardeners program, what sorts of subjects did they cover?

RS: It was a very scientific course. At least the one that I took in at the Cooperative Extension in Missoula was very scientific. That kind of was a little bit hard for my brain. I'm not a very scientific kind of person. I'm more instinctive and intuitive as far as gardening is concerned. But I enjoyed it tremendously, and as it progressed, I found that some things were beginning to sink in. The instructor was fabulous. I mean a more knowledgeable person I've never come across, and more enthusiastic person I've never come across. She was fabulous. Really, really terrific.

SV: Part of that master gardener program is so that people within the community, like yourself, would turn around and help, and it sounds like you've been doing that all along anyway.

RS: I like to do that. I like to give out plants I like to give out seeds. Anybody who wants to come here and listen to me, I'm willing to. [laughs] I'm willing to talk to them at length about it, because I'm very excited about it and I'm very delighted about the gardening experience in the Swan. It's been fabulous. It's extremely productive. The climate is wonderful. The moisture that we have here is wonderful. It grows. My advice to everybody is just grow what grows, and then you're going to have a wonderful garden. You won't have to fight it all the time or spend tremendous amounts of time doing things you don't want to do.

I gave up. This little greenhouse I have up until this year—I didn't do it this year because I had other things that were making me too busy—but I grew peppers and some tomatoes and cucumbers in there. In that environment, the cucumbers and the peppers did extremely well. The tomatoes so-so. My experience out in the garden with plastic covers and so forth was very poor with those plants. But in that little cold-frame greenhouse type thing, it did real well. I'll go back to doing it again probably, because I like to put up pickles and things like that. But other than that, that's as far as I go. Like I said, I started to eliminate a lot of the more sensitive annuals too, and I'm getting more and more perennials or reseeding annuals, which do really well. Or the biennials, like the hollyhocks and foxglove and stuff.

SV: How long have you been gardening here then? I haven't asked you that.

RS: Since I came. I started immediately, which is seven years. I brought my...my son called it, my bindle of seeds. [laughs] And plants. I carted them across the country, and I started this the first very first spring. When I lived at the Summit, I did raise beds in tires. I cut out the tops of tires, and I filled those with dirt and used that for raised beds. It worked out.

SV: It sounds like it beats roto-tilling.

RS: I don't own any power garden tool at all. I have just a pitchfork and one of those long narrow spades, which I consider the top, number-one garden tool of all. I have one little hoe—a pointy hoe—which I use rarely, maybe once in a while to make some furrows. And I have an extremely good trowel, and all trowels are not created equal. A rake and a shovel, and that's it. Pitchfork. That's it. No roto-tilling. I don't believe in it. I can't even bear the thought of cutting up all the worms, first of all. It would just totally blow me away. [laughs] No! It's not necessary I don't walk on any of my beds ever. They don't get stepped on. I'll loosen the beds up with a pitchfork if I feel the need, and that's it. That's no big deal, because the dirt is always soft. The fact that it's not exposed—none of the soil is exposed, or very, very little is it exposed. It's exposed in the spring a little bit, but not very much so it doesn't get hard and doesn't get compacted, because it's not getting pounded directly by rain, it's not getting stepped on.

SV: Looks like you're mowing the grass [unintelligible].

RS: Yes, I do. I have a string trimmer, and I do use that for inside and all my edges. That's why I don't worry about the grass because a lot of people put down plastic and gravel or whatever in their aisles too. But I don't do that because I just mow it. The rocks that I use for borders are somewhat labor intensive. If you really want no work gardening, which doesn't exist, that's not the best idea. The boards are much better. They are a better barrier.

[End of Interview]