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Interviewer: Suzanne Vernon
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Suzanne Vernon: This is Suzanne Vernon, and the date is August 23, 1999. Today, I'll be interviewing Dawn Bishop. Dawn recently completed her master gardener training with County Extension Office in Missoula, and we'll be talking about gardening conditions and what kind of plants grow best here in the Swan Valley. The interview takes place at Dawn's home on the east side of Condon.

[Break in audio]

Dawn Bishop: This particular area where we are is a little higher. It's on a hill. The cold air moves down the hill so anything at the top here in this little courtyard with the house on the north-hand side, I can actually make a different microclimate up by the house. I can actually grow agricultural zone 5-B—some plants of agricultural zone 5-B, which is the highest part of the zone. For one thing, I have a buddleia, or butterfly bush, there.

SV: Was that this stuff?

DB: No. I'll show you. It blooms in late summer or early fall, September, and the butterflies love it. In the South, it's called a summer lilac. It looks a lot like the lilac. The leaves are quite coarse, but you cannot find that in the nursery in Montana because they say they don't grow in this zone. Now, maybe Missoula they have some, but any of the nurseries in the Kalispell-Big Fork area don't carry them.

SV: How did you get started—

DB: I ordered it from a catalog.

SV: So is there [unintelligible].

DB: Yes, and it gets about five foot high. More like a shrub. I would never be afraid to do some tropicals in the valley. I'm not talking about you know leaving the mountain in winter, but cannas are wonderful. Once it gets warm enough, put your canna bulbs right in your garden. Plant them in your garden soil. They make a wonderful striking plant. Then dig them up in the fall and put them in onion sack—something with the netting where they can get some air—with a little peat moss and plant them again the next spring and they'll get bigger and better.

SV: You put your houseplants out there [unintelligible].

DB: Yes. Yes. And they love it outside. These are actually tropical, or subtropical. They grow in California. They don't look too good right now because the hailstorm really went through these leaves, but oh my gosh, the blooms are gorgeous. It's getting ready to bloom here. This is called the angel's trumpet, or brugmansia.

Look at this. This has been blooming for a month, and look at the blooms still to come. They're called angel's trumpet because the blooms get about a foot long. They look like large...well, they kind of look like a lily, but they look like you can blow a trumpet through them. These are three different colors. There's pink, yellow, and white. I cut them down...well, you can see where I cut it off, and this is the growth [unintelligible] this year. But every year I cut them down that far because I want the stems to get [unintelligible].

SV: Then you have to move them back inside.

DB: I take them and put them in the basement. But I have a walkout basement so there is some light there, and I only water them twice a month. In the summertime, they're very vigorous feeders. They take a lot of fertilizer and a lot of water.

SV: What kind of fertilizer do you use [unintelligible].

DB: I use a granule that you mix in with a soil that lasts for six months. I prefer that to...then you don't have the salt and the mineral deposit buildup where you have to flush out the roots.

SV: So you this is a good planting soil or [unintelligible]?

DB: I use a good potting soil and then because I take it inside and sometimes your dirt has eggs from different insects and I don't need any more insects in my house, so I use a good potting soil and I mix a granulated fertilizer with it.

SV: That's something I never would have thought of. Tropicals outside this time of year.

DB: Of course, you have to wait until it quits freezing at night. But up here on the deck close to the house even if it gets to be 28, 29, it doesn't freeze up on the deck close to the house because the house does absorb some heat during the day.

SV: What about the soil in the rest of your outdoor beds.

DB: That's all imported. The most important thing in your garden is your soil, and I happened to have up here hardpan clay so I recommend raised beds.

SV: So you just took everything off and started all the beds from scratch.

DB: Yes, yes.

SV: Did you try rotted manure?

DB: I've got everything in there. A lot of things from the corral over at Owl Creek packers camp. When they scrape those corrals, that's good. It also brings a lot of seed in with it—thistle and whatever horses like to eat. I have some of Holmes's cow manure in here too which works very well. Cow manure doesn't have the amount of seed the horse manure does. Well, they have two stomachs, and they process that weed seed a lot better.

SV: Have you ever had any trouble with chemicals going through in the manure? [unintelligible].

DB: I haven't. I haven't. I do a lot of composting which is a gardener's gold, and it could be very expensive trying to get a lot of soil in here. [laughs] Anywhere. You know, it's not cheap.

SV: You have to put other things. Was there topsoil with it, or [unintelligible].

DB: If your manure is composted or held over a couple of years, you can go with that. But I would say to have your soil test. It's not that expensive, and you can make all the adjustments for perfect soil then. If you've got, let's say, a big pile of composted manure. By all means, use it, but mix a little peat in and then take it down to the extension office and have it tested and see what else you need. It makes a big difference as far as cold hardiness. Some, certain minerals that really contribute to that. Certain elements in the soil—phosphorus and magnesium—some of those trace elements really contribute to the cold hardiness of the plant.

SV: I never thought about that. Is that something that they talk about in that master gardener—

DB: Yes. Our teacher Helen is a real scientist—a soil scientist.

SV: Have you seen the results of trying to change your soil then?

DB: Definitely, definitely. I can see the results right here in the little microclimate outside on the south side of the house. I can see the difference in drainage, in how the ground is sloped, and where the water drains, and how certain plants do in that area that's a little more soggy than other areas. You just gotta keep your eyes open, know your garden, and keep changing. Don't be afraid to dig them up. One of my worst habits is not throwing away or getting rid of. It's hard for me to throw away a living plant. I always try to find somebody to give it to you. Pretty soon, people start running when they see me. "We don't want any more of that, Dawn." [laughs]

I also find that it doesn't hurt if you have a little clay to mix it in with your manure because well-rotted, composted manure does not hold water well. You can use some of that clay, and if you don't have clay and if you have gravel, put kitty litter in it. Kitty litter's clay. Just plain kitty litter, not the scented type or the one with additives. Plain kitty litter with a little clay, is clay and adds some clay to your compost or manure.

SV: [unintelligible]. I have noticed that those really dry out. Does the peat help hold moisture. What's peat do?

DB: Peat is a conditioner. It really doesn't add any minerals or nutrients. It's a soil conditioner for clay. It helps to break up the platelets and give it better drainage and for sandy soil it does the opposite. But in the type of clay we have here in the valley, you couldn't buy enough peat to put it in, so you might better go with a raised bed.

SV: Do you have trouble then with slugs or anything?

DB: This was not a bad slug year this year. There was a very few slugs this year, and that's because we didn't have the snow cover and we had 20 below. So the frost went right into the ground and froze those nasty buggers. But the year before was a big slug year because we had that tremendous snow that went...The winter before that and the ground never froze or only froze like two or three inches, so we had lots and lots of slugs, but this was not too bad a slug year. I actually have more trouble with the grasshoppers than I do slugs.

SV: So again it just depends on what kind of year it is.

DB: Yes. Actually mowing around your garden area and keeping the grass short is a big help.

SV: When did you start gardening? How long have you been gardening?

DB: I guess all my life it seems like.

SV: You grew up with a garden?

DB: No, I did not. My mother didn't garden, and my grandmother didn't garden. I don't know...You catch the bug, I guess. Did you know that gardening is the number one hobby in the U.S. now, and more money is spent on gardening than any other hobby? In fact all you have to do is go to a greenhouse and you know why. We do have a good greenhouse now in the area. Of course, Mrs. Jette's is good, and Grace has a lot of perennial plants that are excellent. Perennial plants for this area. If you're going to grow perennials, you should buy them from a local nursery.

SV: What kind of perennials do you recommend? Do you have favorites? [pause] That's hard. That's a tough question.

DB: It is. I don't know. I have a lot of annuals too that I love, and I like to save room for annuals because they give you color later. I like snap dragons and stocks. S-t-o-c-k-s. They smell lovely. Larkspur. Those are all good.

SV: [unintelligible].

DB: Yes. And godetia is a beautiful annual. [unintelligible] seeds in Roberta's garden. I gave her those plants originally. Mine are gone; hers keep coming back every year. [laughs]

SV: So it must not have been a hybrid. [unintelligible].

DB: It's gorgeous. [pauses] A favorite perennial...I don't know. There's so many wonderful ones.

SV: Well, let's talk about them in different terms. What stuff out here won't the deer eat? I think that's a big question for most people.

DB: Iris.

SV: Deer don't like—

DB: They'll nibble in the spring, they'll try to the top, but that's it. They don't eat iris.

SV: Do you have daffodils around here? Will they eat those?

DB: No. Most ornamental grasses they won't eat. They don't eat the mint. They don't care for the mint.

SV: And you grow three varieties?

DB: This year. [laughs]

SV: [unintelligible].

DB: They don't eat—

SV: But mint comes up every year.

DB: Yes, these are perennial mints. Yeah. They don't eat peonies. They don't eat the day lily—the leaves—but they'll eat the day lily buds so there you go.

SV: Lilies did well this year, you said.

DB: Yes, lilies were gorgeous this year. Good year For lilies.

SV: And you said you started some from seed.

DB: Yes, and that was a lot of fun. The seed is quite it's expensive as far as seed goes. I think I paid a dollar a seed, and it takes—as with any perennial—it takes about three years for it to be at its very best. But they did start blooming the second year, and every seed came up.

SV: Wow, even better at that price.

DB: Yes. But that was fun. That was fun.

SV: Yeah. You get the colors you're after. Wonder why it was such a good year for lilies?

DB: Well, the lilies don't mind the cold for one thing. It's very seldom that you'll freeze a lily. We had snow and or at least we had freezing around the 4th of July, and that doesn't bother lilies. They'll come right back from that. Delphinium also loves cooler weather. It's a good year for delphiniums, and those are very easy to start from seed. Very easy. And there's wonderful colors in delphiniums. Another thing the deer won't eat are foxgloves, digitalis. Wish they would eat them. They'd be dead. [laughs] Those are a beautiful flower. That's a biannual, but they seed themselves. If you leave one stalk, you'll have some every year.

SV: True to color?

DB: There're very few colors in foxgloves. It's white through dark pink. So it's shades of pink and white so you're not going to go farther, and they all have the spotted throat. Very, very pretty.

SV: I've heard a lot about foxgloves [unintelligible], so I imagine most of the nurseries carry some of them.

DB: They're also very easy to start from seed. You start this time of year, just scatter them outside, press them into the soil, don't cover them, and you'll have little plants this fall. Then they go through the winter, and then the next year they'll bloom.

SV: You have a white lilac [unintelligible].

DB: I have them all over. All lilacs do well here. Variegated. The Russian lilacs are especially pretty and do real well here.

SV: The what?

DB: Russian lilacs. Those are the deep, deep-colored ones.

SV: Are they fragrant?

DV: Oh yes. [dog barks] She probably sees something. [dog barks]

[long pause]

I like to put in pots, perennials in pots. I have some perennials out here in pots. This is a mallow, and at the end of the year I put it in the garden. But it makes a nice pot plant.

SV: Then you can move it around.

DB: I have some big Oriental lilies in these two pots and they're going to bloom in another, oh, three weeks or so. Then I'll put them out. I'll take them out this fall and put them in the garden.

SV: So much of this works for cut flowers.

DB: Yes, it does. I grow a lot of flowers for cutting. Over here is a little...this was the first year of the Calla lily in the pot. The more you plant them, the better they look.

These are all annuals. Now, the heliotrope, you can carry that over the winter and then take cuttings in the spring. It's quite expensive to buy per plant an annual. It's like two or three dollars a plant, or four sometimes.

SV: In the spring, you have to bring them out after the frost.

DB: They're very tender. They're the first thing that freezes in the fall, the very first.

SV: So you want to take your cuttings before it starts.

DB: Right.

SV: How do you root your cuttings then?

DB: I just root them in water, and then—

SV: Keep them in the house all winter.

DB: Once they get some nice roots on them, then I put them in little pots. I have some, a light set up in my basement with fluorescent lights, tiers, and keep them under there.

SV: Do you have to keep them under lights all winter?

DB: You could them in the window, but I don't have the kind of windows that I can set a lot of plants on.

SV: Oh, that's wonderful.

DB: It's a wonderful, wonderful perennial. Actually, it's an annual, it's [unintelligible] Zone 9. But just for the fragrance it's worth growing.

SV: What about your roses around front? You could talk about those.

DB: Rugosa roses do very well here. Those are the old-timey roses. Some of them bloom more than once. Some bloom just once a season but that bloom will last for six weeks.

SV: They're fragrant, too, aren't they?

DB: Rugosa's are...practically all of them are fragrant. There are a few floribundas that do well here. One of those is Iceberg, and it has to be in a sheltered situation. Just as I have that fence all around it. On the floribundas, I pile soil on them in the fall after the first hard freeze. Then I mound soil over the roots. [unintelligible].

SV: You have three or four different kinds of roses.

DB: I have two floribundas, the other one is called Apricot Nectar, which is my absolute favorite rose in the world. It's also a floribunda.

SV: So you have to cover it with soil and protect it a little bit then too?

DB: I just mound soil up probably a foot. I also plant them deep. I plant them below...you have to have the graft node at least two to three inches below the soil line in this country. Then my climbing roses are Canadian roses, and those are very popular now, those Canadian roses.

SV: Did you have to go somewhere special to get those?

DB: No, they're starting to carry them in the nursery though I've had these for about three years and I bought them from a rose catalog from Maine. Royal River Roses.

SV: I suppose people could get them here now.

DB: Yes.

SV: They climb tall.

SV: Those are very tall, and they don't die back. I don't do anything with them. Nothing. The canes are probably four-foot of live canes in the spring.

SV: Do they have big hips on them then, too?

DB: No, these don't. Just the rugosa or older roses. I also have a damask rose, called Cecelia, and that does very well here. Some of the really old, old roses do very well here.

SV: Not so tender.

DB: Right. Especially like the damask and the rugosas, but just about every rugose will grow and bloom here.

SV: Yellow, red, pink, whatever color.

DB: Yes. There's a few that are not scented, and I don't bother with those because if I want a rose, if I have a rose, I want the scent. Especially since they only bloom once a year.

SV: Do you dry any of the flowers?

DB: I used to, but I'm usually gone in the fall in the hunting camp and I usually miss most of that season.

SV: You could dry a lot.

DB: Yeah, especially the yarrow. All the yarrow can be dried very well.

SV: Was this one you said it was an old variety.

DB: That's called dame's Rocket.

SV: It's white—

DB: And purple. There's a purple variety also. I started that from seed one year as an annual, and it self-seeds readily. It blooms most of the summer. It has a lovely scent. Smells like stock. It must be from the stock family.

SV: Thought you said it was like cloves.

DB: Yes.

SV: The bee balm, is that a perennial?

DB: Yes, it is, and there are several varieties and several shades all in the pink to magenta. I believe there is a white bee balm now—

SV: And that's doing well.

DB: Yes, and it's also from the mint family, and it's a lovely cut flower.

SV: This was something you planted for a butterfly. Fennel? A kind of fennel?

DB: That's bronze fennel. They not only eat that, they lay their eggs on it—butterfly larvae. That's why they looked like that, almost bare. Usually they're very fluffy, but the butterflies have been eating it.

SV: And the larvae aren't harmful to anything else?

DB: There are certain things I plant for butterflies. The buddleia is the butterfly bush, and then I have another plant, that white one, that had like a little pearls on it was about this high. That's also called a butterfly bush. I don't know the Latin name for it. I can't think of it right now.

Here's something else the deer won't eat. Sweet potato vine. Those are a tropical from Mexico, and they come in like cerise, chartreuse. Very light green, dark green, and purple. Green on the top and purple on the other side. They look marvelous in pots and get huge. Wonderful vine. Those, of course, are native to Mexico so they're...I don't use them in the house because aphids love them, but I plant them out in pots. I have two or three out on the other porch. I'll show you.

SV: And the aphids [unintelligible].

DB: No, inside.

SV: What about other pests outside? Do you notice other pests that you have to deal with?

DB: To some extent, but we have a lot of beneficials here I have more tendency to have problems with different viruses or plant diseases than with the bugs, outside of the grasshoppers which I hate to have to mention again. We have a pretty good balance here. This area is very natural so we haven't had a lot of spraying for bugs here. We have a pretty good balance of nature. You got some aphids on your roses in the spring, especially on the buds in the new growth, but you can wash those off with a hose. Especially rugosas resent spraying. They do not like to be sprayed for insects of any kind. So I just blast them off with the hose.

SV: Now, some of the roses get fungus.

DB: Black spot.

SV: Yeah, and there's another one. [pauses] Anyway, but they do [unintelligible].

DB: Not so much in this area and not with these particular varieties.

SV: [unintelligible].

DB: Right. We have such little amounts of it is not worth treating. Those are mostly for more...humid propagate those things more because they're usually carried on spores.

SV: Do you find that the hummingbirds come to the plants [unintelligible] the bees.

DV: I have a hummingbird feeder I put out in the spring. But as soon as my garden starts to bloom, I take it down. The hummingbirds have particularly liked these two big pots. They're here quite often. The purples and the pinks. I have lots of hummingbirds, but I do quit feeding them. Once again the garden—

[break in audio]

DB: —of course, gorgeous. I never spray the...what the heck is that tall weed? Like that, the yellow one, the top. Can't think of a name of it. They're tall, the tall weeds. They like those seeds, and they like to sit on those. That's about the right size post for bluebirds.

SV: I can't think of what they called either.

DB: You know what I mean, don't you?

SV: There's a goldenrod type of a thing.

DB: No, this is like a big old hollyhock.

SV: Oh, the mullein?

DB: Yes. Thank you. They like to sit on top of that mullein, and they eat the seeds.

SV: [unintelligible].

DB: They're sure native around here. And azara (?) anyway. I'm sure the bottom of the garden by the fence would be much different than here as far as the climate, the little climate—the ecosystem—is much warmer here on top of the hill.

SV: Is there any rule of thumb that you give people for when to set out plant? How do you tell when the last frost in the spring is going to be?

DB: You can't. You have to go with it. I try to put mine out by the middle of May—the annuals. My annuals, anything that's tender are in these pots and I just cover them. All you have to do is throw a sheet on them. Annuals I plant in the garden are much more frost resistant. Stocks love cool weather, and snap dragons are at their very best in cool weather. They'll bloom right in the

snow. They won't come up in the snow, but I mean the ones I planted out will still be blooming when there's snow on the ground.

SV: [unintelligible]. How do you know when to start moving stuff around? Sometimes we get frost in August.

DB: You have to play it by ear, but I've lost some plants moving them too late. One of those was lavender. I had the most beautiful lavender plant. Was huge. I just couldn't keep my hands off it. I wanted it somewhere else and I got out the hills and moved it like the middle of October. Then we got that 20 below in November with no snow cover and didn't have long enough to establish itself.

SV: Just didn't survive.

DB: Lavender is another plant that does pretty well here. If you're in a sheltered area, and I don't mean shade. It's a Mediterranean native so it likes hot and dry.

SV: It'll come up every year?

DB: Yes, it's perennial.

SV: Is Echinacea—

DB: Yes, that's a perennial. It does very well here. It's very easy to start from seed. Will bloom the first year.

SV: There's two kinds of Echinacea, though, is it the purple coneflower or the—

DB: I have both. The White Swan and the purple coneflower, and I started them both from seed.

SV: We didn't talk any more about salad greens. You said just let them go to see and then it—

DB: Comes up by itself. Starts growing in April, and by May I have greens.

SV: That's pretty good plan. I would say.

DB: Getting pretty thick now.

SV: What kinds of greens?

DB: The lettuce has a hard time competing with everything else, but arugula and mustard, several different types of mustard, and kale, spinach, and lettuce.

SV: I call them evergreens, [unintelligible] a name, but what's that for landscaping?

DB: Yews, and the deer will eat them. Even though they don't eat them in the woods, they'll eat them in your garden especially new growth.

SV: You've got a fenced area.

DB: Yeah. Yews and mugo pines. M-u-g-o.

SV: [unintelligible].

DB: Juniper, and even though they don't eat juniper in the woods, they will eat the new growth on your juniper. Most of my shrubs that I have planted are variations of the juniper and yew. Outside of flowering shrubs. Of course, the spirea do well here. The daphne becomes a strong. Cotoneaster.

SV: What color flowers are on those?

DB: Usually, the cotoneaster are white, and they have berries that the birds love. Dark berries.

SV: I was going to ask you if you grew any berries. That would be more of a bird plant.

DB: I've seen a lot of variations of cotoneaster, like up around Glacier, which is...the valley, Glacier itself if you don't go up to the Going to the Sun Highway, it's much lower than we are.

SV: [unintelligible]. Any tricks in the fall to putting stuff to bed. You talked a little bit about deadheading some of this.

DB: Most everything should be deadheaded. Actually, it's better for the plant because they don't use the energy to produce seed, which is their ultimate goal. The energy then goes into the roots to help keep them strong over the winter. Some plants you don't want them to cross pollinate and produce old colors. That's what I'd call them. Everything becomes the same color in phlox if you don't deadhead. Eventually, you lose the variety. The roses I don't deadhead, if they have new buds and stuff coming and it freezes, I leave them because cutting roses makes the plant produce more roses so I don't do any cutting or any additional fertilizing to them after the middle of August here.

SV: How about for fertilizer?

DB: All I do is put compost on my garden. On the garden itself. In the pots, that's different, but in the garden I just use compost.

SV: Then you bring the more tender ones in the pots inside?

DB: Yeah, my potted plants I bring in. My house plants I bring in. [unintelligible].

SV: Sounds like you keep up on education stuff quite a bit. If you went to the—

DB: I subscribe to a lot of magazine, gardening and horticultural magazines, also landscape design, which is...Got to quit that. I keep moving everything. I do a lot of reading in the winter because I find it very interesting and very entertaining. I'm also taking these courses on landscape design.

SV: Are they local?

DB: I do some in Missoula, and then I do some on the Internet. There's an Internet school in California.

SV: How'd you hear about the master gardener?

DB: Read it in the paper.

SV: Did they mention if they had anybody—

DB: [unintelligible].

SV: Out of the university? Did they mention anything about other people from Condon that were taking it?

DB: No. In fact, we're the first. It was a challenging course. I think it depends a lot on who your instructor is.

SV: You said your instructor was a scientist.

DB: Her degrees are in soil science. So this woman knows her stuff. She's excellent. Excellent. And she does have a big truck farm herself that she takes vegetables to the farmer's market, and she furnishes them for some fine restaurants in Missoula. I've seen pictures of her garden with three inches of snow on. She had some roll covers on. Her red peppers, they were absolutely gorgeous. It looked like Christmas bells with all the snow and here these huge red peppers still growing. But the thing she adds to the soil. It's her soil mix that helps with the hardiness, and of course the roll covers helped too, but we're only talking 10 degrees on those roll covers.

SV: You mean the roll covers boost the temperature ten degrees [unintelligible].

DB: At the maximum.

SV: Are you glad you took the course?

DB: Yes! In fact I wouldn't mind taking it over again. As I go home and put it into practical use, some of the things she was teaching that I couldn't really grasp at the time, once in a while I'll be saying to myself, 'Ah! That's what she was talking about.' Definitely.

SV: Good point. We can all do that with different stuff.

DB: With different courses. It was very, very challenging. Lot of college students in there.

SV: Trying to learn the basics I suppose.

DB: Ones that were taking anything at the school. This was not this was not a basics course, believe me.

SV: I didn't ask you how long you've been gardening in the Swan.

DB: Ever since we moved here. We've been here 20 years in different locations.

SV: You go by Dawn Bishop.

DB: I would not be afraid to try just about anything, I mean, within common sense. I would sure give it a try.

SV: Common sense include corn?

DB: I know people that have grown corn up on the hill. Up on a hill. Now that the girls are gone, I don't grow the vegetables I used to. But this walkout basement area is great for tomatoes because you get the heat reflection all the time. Farther into fall, you can keep moving further and further back against the wall. I one time had tomatoes—in fact, it was last year—I had tomatoes until Christmas. Not outside, now. I took the green ones and stored them in the newspaper.

SV: But you did it all without a greenhouse.

DB: Yeah. I'd rather spend my money on other things on a greenhouse. I'm not gonna buy a greenhouse to grow three or four tomatoes.

[End of Interview]