

The First Margaret Ellis Day

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An enthusiastic band of volunteers (including Tim Ellis, far left) spruced up Chewonki's gardens during the first Margaret Ellis Day on June 4.

June 4 dawned fair with a blue sky and trees full of birdsong. It was just the kind of day that Margaret Ellis would have used well—and her friends and admirers knew this as they turned from their own pursuits to spend that beautiful morning working on hers. Margaret Ellis Day was an opportunity to think about Margaret while digging, planting, raking, and pruning in the gardens she first began working on more than 45 years ago at Chewonki.

“She’s definitely here,” remarked one volunteer in dirt-caked gloves to another in overalls. “She’d love this.” Volunteers bent over their tools; marched hither and thither with watering cans and wheelbarrows full of compost; and conferred around the new plants like anxious parents dropping their children at camp.

Margaret was director of healthcare and safety at Chewonki from 1966 to 1991. Before she died last February, she and her husband, former Chewonki president Tim Ellis, decided they’d like to help sustain the flowerbeds Margaret developed decades ago. Phine Ewing ably continued the tradition during Don Hudson’s tenure as president, and now Jenn Barton, wife of current president Willard Morgan, is head of garden care. “Margaret wanted so much for people to round the bend from the Barn and take a deep breath, to stop and experience profound beauty,” says Jenn. “She believed in the healing power of Earth’s living gifts.”

She also believed in gardens as outdoor classrooms. She loved involving Semester School students because she “saw

gardening as learning,” Willard explained. “She asked that students and staff, rather than hired contractors, do the work. In this way, she hoped to lead more young people toward a love for growing things.”

Chewonki seeded the Garden Fund in Memory of Margaret Ellis, and generous friends contributed more than \$9,000 to help it grow. The endowment supports the maintenance of the gardens around the Quad, Center for Environmental Education, and other public spaces at Chewonki.

Jenn had spent hours talking gardening with Margaret, so she had a clear idea of what the volunteers should tackle. Five generations showed up, including imps on pink bikes; Semester School alumni; young women whom Margaret had mentored; old friends, including fellow gardeners “the Ladies of the Dirt”; and even Tim Ellis, recently returned from Montana and Wyoming.

Some volunteers were master gardeners; others were novices. Asked his opinion on the placement of an astilbe, Tim chuckled wryly. “I have absolutely no idea. Margaret always told me what to do!”

What was accomplished? *Lots* of planting. The list of new flora included names that in one way or another brought Margaret to mind: nannyberry, English roses, the iris ‘Immortality,’ the delphinium ‘Summer Stars,’ the daylily ‘Elegant Explosion,’ old-fashioned bleeding heart, white butterfly bush, English daisy, and the ever cheerful pansy, to name but a few. Volunteers also put in a stone walkway and a rose garden behind the Farm House, planted an herb garden, tamed an undisciplined forsythia, and vanquished a vine invading the bed along the Barn.

Jenn Barton hopes Margaret Ellis Day will become an informal yearly tradition. She wants to convey to others the enthusiasm and confidence Margaret instilled in her. Although Margaret’s horticultural knowledge was daunting, “I told myself that I could do it,” says Jenn, because her mentor’s advice “never translated into judgment...It was about delighting in the intricate flower forms and marveling at their survival strategies, their delicacy, their determination, and their beauty.”

Gardening done, the Margaret Ellis Day workers enjoyed lunch in the Wallace Center before carrying out one last, essential task: they oiled their tools—with Chewonki biodiesel. Margaret would have approved. ■

Anne Leslie works in Chewonki’s Development Office and loved Margaret’s passion for gardening.