

The Little Giant

Finding garden books with staying power is Frances Tenenbaum's forte.

by Kathleen Fisher

Just what do editors do, anyway? From movies like “The Front Page” and from “Shoe” on the comic pages, we have an image of newspaper editors as ruffled and overworked journalists whose primary job is to yell about deadlines and shred reporters’ deathless prose.

As for book editors—well, we know that Jackie Onassis got to eat lunch with a lot of other celebrities. But otherwise, don’t they just move commas around and mutter complaints about dangling participles?

Those of us who are less-than-flawless writers can tell you: Finding a good editor is like finding a great hairdresser, therapist, and architect all rolled into one. They make you *look* good, and they make you *feel* good. They do that by combining an exquisite sensitivity to both public taste and your own personal style. But most important, they make sure that if you are building a ranch house of a book, it has useful features—Have you thought of a screened porch?—without any gargoyles or flying buttresses that will make you a laughingstock.

Everyone who has worked with Frances Tenenbaum says she is that kind of editor.

For the past 24 years, Tenenbaum has been an editor for Houghton Mifflin Company in Boston, and for the past three or four she has worked exclusively on garden books. She snagged the newspaper columns that became Henry Mitchell’s latest book. She shepherded *Noah’s Garden*, Sara Stein’s award-winning ecological call-to-arms, into print, and she shapes the long-running and extremely successful series of



With a keen eye and a firm hand, Houghton Mifflin’s Frances Tenenbaum turns raw manuscripts into classic garden books.



In her Boston office, top, Tenenbaum checks out potential images for a book project, while Lisa White, manuscript editing supervisor, looks on. Above: A sampling of the gardening books that Tenenbaum has edited, written, or championed include, left to right: *Tasha Tudor's Garden*, *Taylor's Weekend Gardening Guides: Window Boxes*, *Henry Mitchell on Gardening*, *Taylor's Guide to Ornamental Grasses*, *Taylor's Dictionary for Gardeners*, and *An Island Garden*.

Taylor's Guides to gardening basics. In addition, last year she herself compiled *Taylor's Dictionary for Gardeners*, a user-friendly guide to thousands of gardening and horticultural terms.

Four years ago, she began working closely with Connecticut author Tovah Martin and Vermont photographer Richard Brown to create the gorgeous *Tasha Tudor's Garden*, which has sold almost 100,000 copies and spawned spinoffs that include a crafts book and calendars.

"When you put in a proposal, she doesn't just lean on your instincts," says Martin, who has written books for several other publishing houses. "She grows the book with you, so it becomes more than the original idea.

"Part of being an editor is being a bulldog," Martin recognizes, "but Frances gets authors to blossom, so that it's more like a club than a job. You don't feel the pressures that come into writing a book, which can be so strenuous and awful."

Both Martin and Sara Stein recall little notes and friendly phone calls that kept them on track and inspired, rather than harried.

When Stein auctioned the manuscript for her ground-breaking *Noah's Garden*, Tenenbaum wasn't the original winner. "Then we began to feel uncomfortable and we broke the contract," Stein says of herself and her agent. "Frances had a deeper understanding of the book, and she helped me know what to throw away, what was too long, too technical, too difficult." On the other hand, she says, Tenenbaum also knew when the flow of a phrase would run aground on the rocks of botanical nomen-

clature. "She has a flexibility that I think comes with age and experience."

Stein put her finger on one of the trends so discouraging to garden book authors: Many publishers are letting veteran garden editors leave, and their replacements may know nothing about horticulture—and little more about editing.

The other trend is the marketplace itself, where independent publishers and independent bookstores are being replaced by giant publishing conglomerates and mega book chains. In this huge and impersonal new world, most garden books are thrown together with an eye toward quick profits and an equally quick oblivion.

Pam Lord, founder of the Garden Book Club and a member of the American Horticultural Society's Book Award Committee, respects Tenenbaum for bucking the trend. "She really cares, because she gardens herself," Lord says. "She can smell a phony a mile away, and she won't publish anything she can't be proud of."

A Day in the Life

In spite of Tenenbaum's long tenure at Houghton Mifflin, the receptionist frowns at the name as she runs her finger through a staff roster when we arrive for a visit. Tenenbaum explains that she's not on staff, but under contract. That keeps her life flexible, and from Independence Day through Labor Day, she can work from her summer home on Martha's Vineyard.

From her eighth-floor office at the corner of Boylston and Berkeley, Tenenbaum has an impressive view of the Boston cityscape but misses the birds that frequented a former Houghton Mifflin site. "The office there was even smaller though," she says. "If I had visitors, I had to arrange the chairs in a line, like in a classroom."

Tenenbaum quickly explains that her office is not always this tidy. She likes to spread her manuscripts and references all over the floor. But her daughter, Jane, who is in town from Madison, Wisconsin, has cleaned up for today's expected company. Tenenbaum says that both Jane, a graphic designer, and her son, David, who also lives in Madison and writes text for a children's science web site, inherited traits she lacks: They're both extremely organized and relatively tall. Tenenbaum will talk about her diminutive stature. "I'm definitely taller than Tovah Martin. She's under five foot." But not her age. "You can say that Jane is 50. David is...somewhat younger."

Tenenbaum's authors believe she's good at what she does because she is both a gardener and a writer herself. Quick to put illusions to rest, Tenenbaum denies that she was born to do either.

"My mother was a great gardener. When I was about five, she made me a little garden, as we will for our children. I told her, 'You like it, you take care of it.'"

As did both her children, she went to undergraduate school in the upper Midwest, but, unlike them, she couldn't resist the pull of her native New York. She "ended up" at the Columbia School of Journalism and got her first job writing features for the *New York Herald-Tribune*. When her children were small, she wrote a free-lance column for a suburban newspaper, "mostly covering the school board, which was contentious as only a suburban school board can be."

It wasn't until she got her first home, in Great Neck, Long Island, that Tenenbaum discovered gardening. Her delighted mother, gratification long delayed, donated some perennials. But designing the garden wasn't what Tenenbaum enjoyed most. "I found that I was addicted to weeding! It makes such a difference so quickly. And you can do it sitting down. But I think I prefer weeding to planting for the same reason that I prefer editing to writing."

Tenenbaum wrote her first gardening book after she and her husband, Frank—an engineer who died in 1972—built their summer home in the Gay Head section of Martha's Vineyard. Watching bulldozers plow through the natural landscape, she decided that other people should be more aware of wildflowers. "I didn't do it as an expert," she notes, "but as a journalist, through interviews." Scribner published *Gardening with Wild Flowers* in 1973; Ballantine republished it as a paperback, and it was in print for years.

That was rewarding from an author's point of view, but it became irritatingly restrictive to the budding gardener. In the book, says Tenenbaum, "I was insufferably pure about not tinkering with the natural landscape." As a result, the "garden" was little more than a sand dune sporting beach plum, bayberry, and brambles.

When *Gardening With Wild Flowers* disappeared from book stores, she threw off her self-imposed shackles and began planting everything that struck her fancy, no matter how inappropriate to the site. Eventually, though, she began to improve



the soil, and through both economy and pride, scrounged her own amendments. There were drives from Long Island with bags of homemade compost leaking from the roof of the car and one memorable Easter weekend spent digging manure by moonlight. "I realized that was nothing, though, when one of our Gay Head neighbors flew manure in with his private plane."

When she's not at Martha's Vineyard, Tenenbaum lives in a Cambridge apartment with little room for gardening. The balcony is the domain of Pumpkin, an 11-year-old miniature dachshund who uses the space for her "catbox." Says Tenenbaum: "I keep a few houseplants—until I kill them."

She does continue to experiment in Gay Head. "The best part of gardening on the island is scavenging, so I get eel grass and salt-marsh hay from the edges of Menemsha Pond, leaves from around my Cambridge apartment, compost from my brother's Connecticut garden, and shingles from the town dump to help plant a steep sandy slope." Even the celebrities who frequent the Vineyard have made unwitting contributions. The set for a Carly Simon concert yielded a featherweight faux log that Tenenbaum used to support part of a raised bed.

She's given up perennials that fail to satisfy, such as oriental poppies, which never flower when she's there, and bearded iris, which are easily tattered by island winds. Siberian irises flourish, though, and her mother's garden lives on there in daylilies and epimediums—"I have a lot of daylilies, including some wonderful tetraploids, in shades of rose and pink. Lavender is beau-



Tenenbaum's tidy garden in the Gay Head section of Martha's Vineyard, above and top, abounds in airy, graceful plants, including cleomes, coneflowers, daylilies, gaura, coral bells, lavender, liatris, and Shasta daisies.



Tenenbaum delights in scrounging garden supplies. This fake log was left over from the set of a Carly Simon concert.

tiful, and I love gaura." Baptisia, coral bells (*Heuchera sanguinea*), and Shasta daisies are happy, and now that a small oak tree has become a big one, so are astilbe and lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*). A Vineyard neighbor let her dig up a lilac and an American pillar rose to transplant to her garden.

"But I don't do what my writers tell everybody else to do. I don't plan. I don't buy three of everything. What was it Henry Mitchell said? You should garden for fun, because you get enough of the other at the office." While she loves her work, Tenenbaum figures life holds enough duties without mowing and pruning and deadheading.

Encountering the Curmudgeon

Tenenbaum's eye for good garden writing is epitomized by her persistence in acquiring the rights to Henry Mitchell's gardening columns. Another publisher had nabbed Mitchell's first book of columns, published as *The Essential Earthman*, in 1981. Tenenbaum, who is tireless about keeping up with garden publishing and everyone in it, wrote him a fan letter and asked him to consider Houghton Mifflin if he ever did another book.

It wasn't until a decade later that Tenenbaum finally got a call from Mitchell's wife, Ginny. The *Washington Post* columnist had told his wife that no one would buy his old work, but that if she were able to get it published, she could have the royalties. (See "The Exuberant Pilgrim" in *The American Gardener*, September/October 1997.)

Tenenbaum wasted no time accepting the offer. She received a carton bulging with yellowed newspaper clippings and exuding the aroma of Mitchell's ever-present cigarettes. For weeks she read them in bed, sorting the best from the merely great, and had them typed and sent back. Then one day on the phone Ginny Mitchell said to her, "Henry wants to talk to you."

It had never crossed Tenenbaum's mind to change any of Mitchell's words. "Why would you?" she asks. Nevertheless, she was terrified. "I expected that curmudgeonly voice that you hear in his columns. Then he got on the phone with that wonderful southern accent and he was totally delightful. He spent nearly all of the time telling stories and hardly mentioned the book." The Mitchells stayed at Tenenbaum's Cambridge apartment while Henry was being treated for the colon cancer to which he eventually succumbed in 1993.

The Personal Touch

Tenenbaum loves e-mail, and her computer chirps frequently to signal the arrival of a new message. "The only problem is that when I get to the island and hear real birds, I think I have new e-mail," she says. The phone buzzer is busy, too. She takes a call from Mac Griswold, who's writing a book about gardening at George Washington's Mount Vernon estate in Virginia. We had just been looking at some of the gorgeous photography by Roger Foley, who lives in nearby Arlington, Virginia.

Does she ask Griswold how the book is coming? No, she waits until the author brings up business. "Some of us were wondering," Tenenbaum says. "Is 'Mac' an abbreviation for something, or is it your real name?" She's interested to learn that it's Griswold's real name, for a grandfather who was the last of nine children. Griswold's parents had wanted a boy.

Tenenbaum's close personal connection with her authors can bring an extra measure of pain when a book fails to sell well. Tenenbaum invested a piece of her heart in two recent little books of essays: *My Vegetable Love*, by Carl H. Klaus, and *Foxgloves and Hedgehog Days*, by Daniel Blajan. But in spite of warm reviews, neither one took off in bookstores.

Have television and the Internet left Americans with no attention span for mere text? Tenenbaum and others say it's not potential readers who lack patience, but the publishers. Something has been lost with the takeover of large publishing houses by non-

publishing corporations—Houghton Mifflin and Norton are now the only exceptions to this trend, according to Tenenbaum.

And remember that little bookstore on the corner, where the owner was always behind the counter and knew every book on the shelves? Stores like these now represent only 10 percent of the market. In the sprawling chain stores, a book that doesn't stand out doesn't move—except to the discount table.

So much more now than in the past, an editor has to not only be a wordsmith, bulldog, and hand-holder, but also be market-conscious. "It doesn't do any good to write a book that no one knows is out there," says Tovah Martin. "If you write a book that's text heavy, you're pitted against the packagers who are looking for something glitzy. Frances has the ability to sit up and listen in a world where people are getting a bit lazy."

Books That Last

Tenenbaum's cardinal rule is: "I don't want to do books that will disappear in three months."

A book with just such staying power is *An Island Garden*, written by New England poet Celia Thaxter and illustrated with paintings by Childe Hassam, an important American Impressionist. Originally published in 1894, the book went out of print in 1902 after only 2,000 copies had been published. After the book was discovered in Houghton Mifflin's basement archives by another editor with a passion for classics, Tenenbaum fell in love with it and championed its reprinting in 1988. Says Pam Lord: "She helped give Americans back their horticultural history—something they don't even realize they have."

Although Tenenbaum swears that she won't do another "literary" gardening book, she knows that if the right one comes along—and there aren't many—she will give in to her instincts.

A good editor can also be compared to a skilled surgeon. Fans say Tenenbaum's instincts are razor sharp in cutting through superficial cuteness and syrup. She knows how to find the heart of garden writing, if there is one to be found.

"She doesn't deal with malarkey," says Pam Lord, "and I'm respectful of any book she publishes. I would call her a little giant."

Former editor of The American Gardener, Kathleen Fisher is a free-lance writer living in Alexandria, Virginia.