

Madalene's Herb Gardens

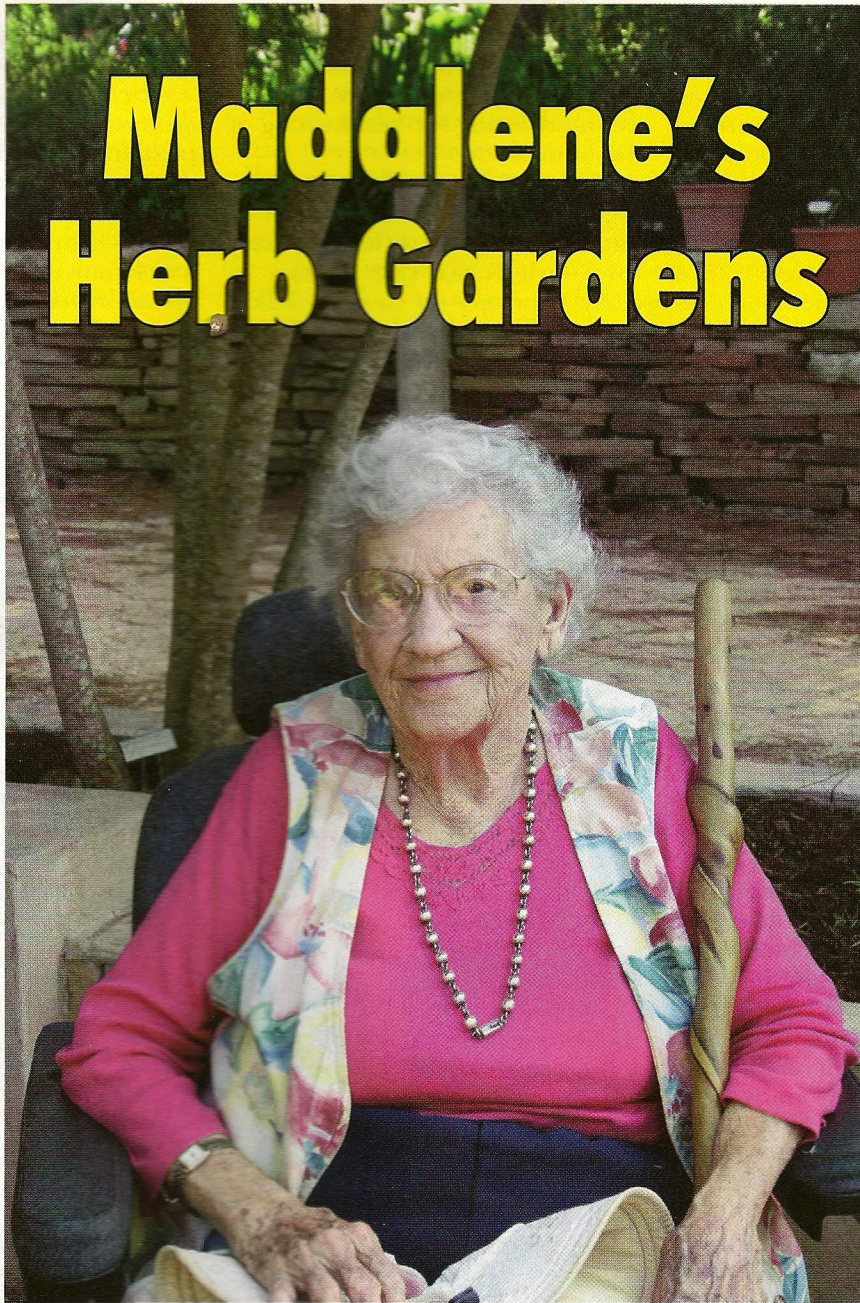


Photo: Jim Long; all others Vicki Blachman

Madalene Hill's "little plants" are living legacies of her life's work.

It's a safe bet anyone who knew Madalene Hill has a garden associated with that memory. It could be the McAshan Gardens of Festival Hill, where she spent the last 16 years of her life. Perhaps it's that remote patch of East Texas Pineywoods she transformed into the original Hilltop Herb Farm, or the herb garden she started in Houston's Hermann Park with the South Texas Unit of the Herb

Society. It could be one of several gardens dedicated to her, such as the one at the Arbor Gate nursery in Tomball. But whether it's the knot garden of the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., or a rural herb garden closer to Washington-on-the-Brazos, there is no doubt her influence lingers among the scents and textures of every southern herb garden that grows today.

It's been almost two years since her passing. As a small tribute, I decided to contact several of

her longtime friends and ask what herb they most associate with her. What you need to know about these friends is that they are all quite well known for their own contributions to the study or cultivation of herbs as accomplished authors, horticulturists, gardeners and scientists. Their responses convey an appreciation of Madalene's incredible eye and palate, her passionate search for herbs well suited to the challenges of southern gardens and her perception of slight but meaning-

BY VICKI BLACHMAN
Contributing Writer

ful differences in appearance and taste that went largely unnoticed by others. Their obvious respect for her knowledge of herbs is no small testament to her abilities.

Rexford Talbert has been a member of the Herb Society of America since 1968, is co-founder and former chairman of the South Texas Unit, and has served on the HSA Board of Directors. Rex is also the recipient of the Nancy Putnam Howard award for horticultural excellence and his articles have appeared in *The Herb Companion*, *The Gilded Herb*, *The Herbarist*, and *Kitchen Gardens*, among others. Long before I had the pleasure of meeting him, I kept hearing about the man who brought Madalene the unusual oregano that for years was known only as "Rex's oregano." Here Rex shares the story of that herb, now properly identified as *Origanum x majoricum* 'Hilltop Herb Farm,' and says it's the plant he most associates with Madalene Hill.

On my many trips around the country during the 30 years I worked for NASA, I always kept my eyes open for different or unusual herbs. I brought back to Houston and to Madalene a number of plants that in several cases she introduced into the trade through Hilltop Herb Farm.

In this instance, she fell in love with the fragrance and culinary utility of a plant I found in a nursery in Redwood City, California. It was one of several dozen plants marked simply as "oregano" in three-inch pots on a makeshift table of plywood underpinned by sawhorses. My eyes told me one plant was different. This opinion was to be subsequently reinforced by my nose, and much to the dismay of the owner, I only wanted the one in the middle of this table and he had considerable difficulty in reaching this prize. He kept telling me that the ones

that were more easily retrieved were much better looking. One sniff of the plant convinced me that it was considerably different than any of its companions and not at all your everyday culinary oregano.

Madalene named it "Rex's Oregano" and incorporated it into her herb sale list. More importantly, she made it a plant she used over and over in her business and personal kitchen. The fragrance was clearly that of sweet marjoram, but the plant was darker green and decidedly hardy even in the East Texas winters that sweet marjoram never survived.

After several years, she sent cuttings to a mutual and lifelong friend of ours, Dr. Arthur O. Tucker, a taxonomist and internationally known herbal expert, who identified the plant as a hybrid of sweet marjoram (*Origanum majorana*) and oregano (*Origanum vulgare*, subsp.

'African Blue' basil.





'Arp' rosemary.



Green pepper basil.

virens). The taxonomic name of any cross of these two taxa was named *Origanum x majoricum*. This particular cross, however, had produced an unusually unique genetic blend of parental characteristics, the domination of one parent's fragrance and the other parent's hardiness — a very individual and useful serendipity. There were indeed many *Origanum x majoricum* offspring in the trade, but this one stood out.

Armed with this identification, Madalene chose to honor her by-then tornado-destroyed herb farm and the memory of its co-founder, Jim Hill, her late husband, by giving the herb the cultivar name by which it is still known. This herb continues to this day to be listed as *Origanum x majoricum* 'Hilltop Herb Farm.'

Rex's story beautifully illustrates a process that occurred again and again throughout Madalene's love affair with herbs. She could detect a subtle difference in flavor, appearance or hardiness that might make an herb distinctive. Then, rather than keep the plant to herself, she would go about making it more readily available to everyone. Often, she worked closely with Art Tucker to identify the science behind her observations before urging her extensive contacts in the nursery trade to get the plants propagated and into the marketplace. She wanted every herb gardener to have access to these treasures.

Holly Shimizu, Director of the U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington, D.C., first met Madalene in the spring of 1980, just after Holly became curator of the National Herb Garden at the U.S. National Arboretum. She had no hesitation in naming *Mentha x gracilis* (also called Scotch spearmint, ginger mint, red mint and red-stemmed applemint) as the herb she most associates with Madalene Hill. Holly recalls, "In one of the many great programs that I attended, Madalene said that red-stemmed applemint was definitely the best mint for culinary purposes since it combines the flavor of spearmint

and peppermint. Now it is the only mint I grow, and I use it for teas, salads and in any food that calls for a great-flavored mint. It is a cross between *Mentha arvensis* and *Mentha spicata*, grows about 24 inches tall, and grows well in a container as long as you give it plenty of water. I love it and always think of Madalene when harvesting it."

Arthur Tucker joins Holly in mentioning *Mentha x gracilis*. Tucker is a research professor at Delaware State University, where he specializes in the chemistry and identification of herbs. He has a B.S. from Kutztown State College, an M.S. and doctoral degrees from Rutgers University. His works include scholarly and popular publications, and he co-authored *The Big Book of Herbs* with Thomas DeBaggio. A member of the New Jersey Unit of HSA, he has received the Nancy Putnam Howard Award for Excellence in Horticulture, the Helen de Conway Little Medal of Honor and the Gertrude B. Foster Award for Excellence in Herbal Literature. It was Tucker's reasoning for his choice of *Mentha x gracilis* that I thought so clearly honored Madalene's innate curiosity and perception:

In *Mentha*, there is the "Reitsema rule" (Reitsema, 1958. J. Amer. Pharm. Assoc., Sci. Ed. 47:267-269.): 3-oxygenated monoterpenes (e.g., menthol) and 2-oxygenated monoterpenes (e.g., carvone) are biosynthesized on mutually exclusive pathways, controlled by mutually exclusive genes, and cannot be in the same plant, *i.e.*, "doublemints" are impossible! However, there are some forms of *Mentha* that violate this rule because they have a high chromosome number and a balance of multiple recessive genes against a few dominant genes, resulting in a breakdown of simple Mendelian genetic inheritance. In my Ph.D. research, I discovered one of these came from Hilltop as "red-stemmed applemint" and keyed out to *Mentha x gracilis* with $2n=96$. I asked Madalene for the source when I

purchased it from her in 1965, and she told me Plantation Gardens, run by the Chalfins in Rusburg, Virginia. And my catalog from this defunct nursery does, indeed, list red-stem applemint. This mint has 40% carvone/dihydrocarveol, 22% menthol, 13% limonene, and is so unique that I renamed it 'Madalene Hill.' I appreciated Madalene because she and Gwen were not afraid of Science (with a capital S); they embraced it.

Often, to Tucker's delight, what he had written in scientific publications was digested and reinterpreted by Madalene. He appreciated her knack for making the science more approachable and available to the public, often in literally delicious ways. The cooking demonstrations she taught with daughter, Gwen Barclay, educated palates and opened minds to the pleasures of cooking with herbs as well as the science behind the flavors. When the lessons were so palatable, who could fail to listen?

Henry Flowers is the Director of Gardens and Grounds for the International Festival-Institute (Festival Hill) in Round Top, Texas. He graduated from Texas A&M University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Horticulture, and again in 1993 with a Master of Agriculture degree in Floriculture. Upon graduation, he joined the staff of the Antique Rose Emporium and later managed their main retail facility and gardens in Independence, Texas. Henry associates 'Newe Ya'ar' sage with Madalene due to the story of how she first encountered it, and because it demonstrates her constant search for herbs that were more suited to the growing conditions encountered in Southern gardens.

Madalene and Gwen were preparing for a cooking class at Rice Epicurean Market in Houston. One of the employees had brought some packaged herbs from the market for them to use. Madalene noticed a package labeled oregano was actually a sage; and in inspecting the sage carefully, she no-

ticed it was a bit different from other sages she had grown. She kept this one and took it home to be propagated. After a couple of years of growing the plant, she recognized it was a very nice variety for our hot, humid climate. It is a robust grower, often blooming at 2-3 feet in height in the spring. More importantly, unlike most other varieties of sage, it did not succumb easily to root rot. Knowing that this was a plant of merit, Madalene set about trying to find out its origin and proper name. With the help of University of Delaware professor and friend Art Tucker and the International Herb Association, she was able to track the herb back to an Israeli agricultural research facility known as the Newe Ya'ar Research Center. Among its many areas of agricultural research is a program to evaluate and produce plants for the cut-herb market in Israel. It was found that this plant is a cross between *Salvia officinalis* and *Salvia fruticosa*, another culinary sage of the region.

Although Madalene did not create or find this herb, she did recognize its potential and her efforts helped to get it into commerce in the United States. I personally have come to believe that it is the best variety for us, and I rarely grow any of the others as they all too quickly give up the ghost.

Henry also recounted the story told to him by Madalene about Mexican mint marigold (*Tagetes lucida*). She said on the day the astronauts landed on the moon, a woman came to Hilltop Herb Farm to bring her a start of an herb with a long history of use in medicinal teas in Mexico. Madalene distinctly remembered the day because they watched a television broadcast of the lunar landing, and her guest was adamant that it was a hoax. Madalene grew the plant in her gardens for years before she realized its great potential as a substitute for French tarragon, a plant notoriously difficult to grow in the South. Thanks in large measure to Madalene's



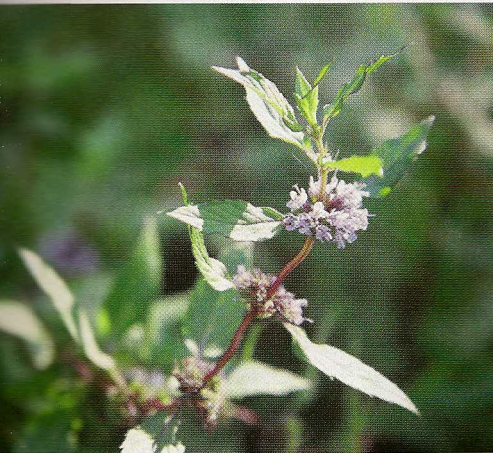
Hill Hardy rosemary.



'Hilltop Herb Farm' oregano.



Red-stemmed apple mint.



Shimizu.



Pelargonium.

efforts, the plant is now readily available and frequently referred to as Texas tarragon. Henry says he'll never forget her story of the day the astronauts landed on the moon.

Tony and Kay Scanapico found their piece of paradise in Round Top, Texas, just a short walk down the road from Festival Hill. A travel guide gave the population as 81, while at the same time mentioning the Concert Hall at Festival Hill held 1,200 people. Thinking one number or the other certainly had to be a typo, they took a road trip to see for themselves and decided they liked the area well enough to purchase some property there. Tony notes the Concert Hall still holds 1,200, but the official population of Round Top has dropped to 77 over the years.

Now they are both retired, involved in the Pioneer Unit of the Herb Society of America, and masters of the arts of hospitality and gardening. They welcome their guests with entertaining stories and a beautiful view from comfortable chairs scattered about their broad-shaded front porch. Tony has created a delightful recirculating brook that meanders through the garden and provides ideal growing conditions for a collection of irises and swamp roses. To the delight of their visitors, both human and wildlife, there is always something blooming. One of his favorite "filler" plants is 'African Blue' basil, an herb introduced to him by Madalene Hill. Although Tony feels it's a bit too camphorous to enjoy as a culinary herb, he loves its blue flowers for attracting bees, butterflies and even hummingbirds. It's not typically winter hardy in zone 8. So each spring Tony easily propagates 'African Blue' basil from cuttings and as weather warms, finds it quickly grows to fill in blank spots in the garden. He advises keeping it regularly trimmed to prevent the splitting that often occurs in large woody basil plants.

Kay Scanapico shared a favorite memory. She says it's really rosemary she most associates with Madalene, but quickly adds that whenever she harvests thyme she

remembers once asking how much of the fresh herb to include in an herbal blend. Madalene replied with that mischievous twinkle she could get in her eye, "Don't worry about using too much. You'll get tired of pulling those leaves off before you get too much." Kay says so far, Madalene's always been right.

Rosemary is an herb many associate with Hill. Jim Long even writes of an Herbalists' Hall of Fame in which his rosemary collection stands in tribute to her lifetime of wisdom. The link between Madalene and *Rosmarinus officinalis* is primarily due to her efforts to find and make available a variety of rosemary that's cold hardy in southern gardens. During a winter visit to Arp, Texas, she noticed a stand of rosemary that had managed to withstand particularly harsh freezing temperatures. She took cuttings, encouraged commercial growers to cultivate the hardy plant, and it became known in the trade as 'Arp' rosemary. The herbarist Thomas DeBaggio honored her in the late 1980s by introducing another hardy rosemary he named Hill Hardy Rosemary *Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Madalene Hill.' I've seen quite a bit of discussion about this, but Tom's son, Francesco DeBaggio, confirms this to be the full name given by his father to the plant. It is said to be even more cold hardy than 'Arp,' but on the other hand, its appearance suffers if the plant isn't well-mulched and given afternoon shade during our grueling Texas summers.

Jim Long is the owner of Long Creek Herbs in Blue Eye, Missouri. He is a regular contributor to *The Herb Quarterly*, *The Herb Companion*, *The Heirloom Gardener*, *The Ozarks Mountaineer* and *Small Farm Today* magazines, and maintains an informative and entertaining blog at JimLongsGarden.blogspot.com. Jim's blog has several enjoyable posts about his visits with Madalene, my favorite being the one titled "Madalene Hill on a Sunny Day" dated March 6, 2009, the day after her death at age 95. Jim was happy to share information on the herb he most associates with her:

green pepper basil or *Ocimum sel-loi*. Jim reports this basil was first collected near Chiapas, Mexico, by botanist Dennis E. Breedlove, curator emeritus of the California Academy of Sciences. Madalene was instrumental in introducing this noteworthy basil to the membership of the Herb Society of America because two traits endeared it to her: it appeared to be more frost resistant than other basil and it retained its flavor in cooking. Of particular interest to her was research into the plant's use in processed foods. This was significant, she said, because two flavors difficult to keep through a cooking, freezing-then-thaw and microwave process are green peppers and basil. This plant showed promise for holding both flavors well.

Jim has found the frost resistance to be true in his Ozarks zone 7a gardens and says it isn't affected when fall frosts eliminate the leaves on all other basil. Like any *Ocimum*, he says, the more the plant is harvested and clipped, the better the flavor in new growth. Art Tucker has performed some analysis on the plant and reports that although he can identify the green pepper pyrazines, he has not yet completely isolated the chemicals nor is he able to accurately report a level. You may find it entertaining that when typing the word "ocimum" I always remember Madalene's distinctive voice instructing in the correct pronunciation — "not Awkimum ... Oh see mum!"

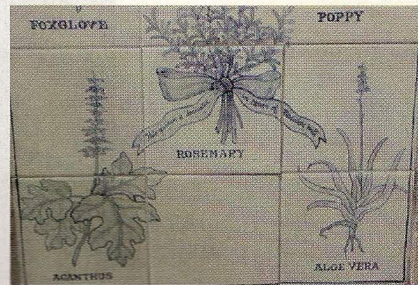
Speaking of memories, I'll never forget the first time I brushed a soft fuzzy leaf of *Pelargonium tomentosum* against my cheek and smelled the intense peppermint fragrance. There are few plants I associate more strongly with Madalene than pelargoniums, commonly called scented geraniums. Whether mint-, fruit- or rose-scented (and even the less pleasant oak-leaf varieties), they've since become my favorite herbs in no small part due to their association with memories of her and Gwen. On a recent visit to the herb gardens of Festival Hill, I was happy to see containers of these South

African natives lined up on a wall where they could seduce and delight visitors with their mimicry of familiar scents.

The Madalene Hill Pharmacy Garden is on the path just beyond those scented geraniums. It's often said that more than 75 percent of the world's population still obtains its medicines from plants, and this incredible collection of medicinal herbs is arranged by country of origin. As I stroll through the various gardens, it's difficult to no longer be able to look up and find Madalene headed my way to share a bit of wisdom. Thank goodness, Henry Flowers and the members of the Pioneer Unit continue to share and build upon her amazing legacy. Next chance you get, you might plan your own road trip to Round Top. For motivation, get more information on the various gardens of Festival Hill online at <http://festivalhill.org/campus-facilities/gardens/>.

Not that I'd wait that long, but if your road trip's in the fall and you're that close to Houston anyway, why not have the ultimate herb enthusiast's vacation by planning your trip around the South Texas Unit's annual Herb Fair? Generally held in October, it's their sole fundraiser of the year. They've been doing this for 38 years and they really know how to pull out all the stops with plants, products and programs. Of course, I'm a bit biased having enjoyed the company of this group as a member for many years. And if you're going to be in Houston for the Herb Fair, you'll have to visit www.arbortgate.com/herb_garden.php for information on the Madalene Hill Herb Garden maintained by the Arbor Gate nursery of Tomball, Texas, since 2005. Their collection includes many of the herbs mentioned in this article as well as others closely associated with Madalene.

This spring, I'm hoping you'll be inspired to dedicate a bit (or perhaps a bit more) of your garden to what Madalene called her "little plants." These legacies of Madalene's own gardens and life's work will bring you enjoyment and beauty for years to come. TG



This sign marks the entrance to the Madalene Hill Pharmacy garden.



Holly Shimizu associates *Mentha x gracilis* with Madalene Hill.



Salvia 'Newe Ya'ar.'