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Hank Fellows poses with his Aunt Dorothy, who has Bill in her arms, outside the Gloucester home of Dorothy and Bert Oppenheim in a photo from around 1956.

Summer Long Ago

By HANK FELLOWS

Coleus: noun, a plant with multi-colored leaves; a memory of love.

Coleus. Yes, I remember coleus. When I was a little boy growing up in New York City, my family would spend our summers at the vacation house of my Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Bert Oppenheim. Aunty and Uncle Bert did not have children of their own. The summer interlude gave them a chance to pamper my brother Bill and me, while giving us a summer away from the hot, humid city.

The summer house, a grand old post-and-beam structure, was situated in the sea-side town of Gloucester. Aunty and Uncle Bert's summer house had been built in 1905, during Gloucester's heyday, by Henry Plimpton Spaulding, a gentleman artist from the Boston aristocracy. The house had dark

spruce paneling, and creaked at night, and I grew to love that house very much.

From an early age, it was my job at the beginning of each summer season to plant the flower boxes for the sprawling back porch. Aunty and Uncle Bert would take me to the local nursery where I could pick out whatever flowers I wanted, with one exception: I had to include at least one coleus plant in each flower box. Aunty told me that coleus was a "very grateful" plant, and its broad, multi-colored leaves would enrich each flower box all summer long.

Back at the house, I would set to work. I would arrange all of the plastic flats from the nursery on the picnic table near the barbecue. I would pop out each of the little plants from its flat, and arrange a variety of marigolds, geraniums, petunias, ivy, and

(of course) coleus for each flower box. There were always six flower boxes for the back porch. I knew that planting these flower boxes was an important job, because Auntie and Uncle Bert did most of their summer entertaining on the back porch. Although considered "summer people," Auntie and Uncle Bert were friendly and hospitable, and had a wide circle of Gloucester friends. All summer long, local doctors, lawyers, artists, and business people would come to drink cocktails and trade stories on that porch.

I would work steadily, but I was a little boy, and the planting would take me several hours. Then I would proudly carry each finished flower box to its assigned place on the porch. Once the flower boxes were in place, I would water them with the big, old tin watering can. I had learned early on that carrying a flower box full of wet earth was too heavy for a little boy.

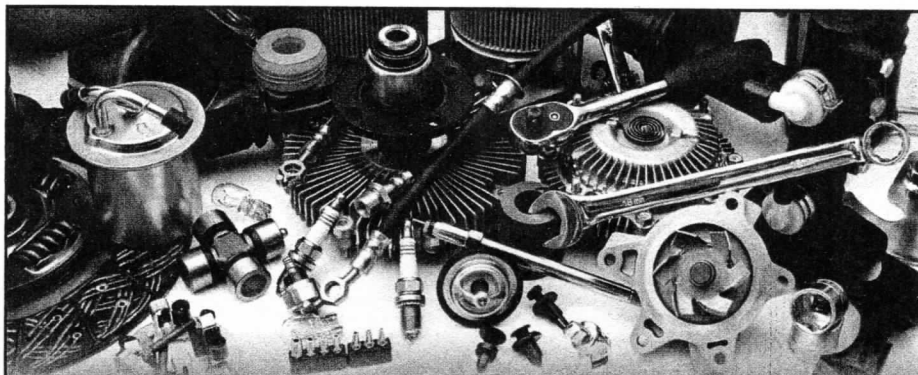
When I was ready, I would call Auntie and Uncle Bert to see my handiwork. After a careful inspection, they would always agree that these had to be the most beautiful flower boxes in all of Gloucester. All summer long, I would water the flower boxes each day, for the summer sun, even in New England, would dry them out quickly. And each day, Auntie would tend to the growing flowers, nipping off the faded ones to make way for the new buds. Sometimes, Auntie would say to me, "Look at these coleus, Hank, see how grateful they are!"

Those golden summers with Auntie and Uncle Bert are, of course, long gone.

A while ago, I found an envelope of old summer photographs. There we were at the beach, and at a barbecue, and playing in the backyard at the Gloucester house. And there was a photo of me with Auntie and Uncle Bert, smiling, standing in front of the flower boxes that I had just planted. But the flower boxes were not beautifully planted. The plants were not straight, and the planting was not symmetrical. There were gaps that should have been filled in. Any grown-up with pride in their summer plantings would have quietly re-planted those flower boxes. But no one ever did.

Coleus. Yes, I remember coleus. And I am grateful, too.

Hank Fellows lives with his wife and son in New York City. This is Hank's 66th consecutive summer spending time at his family's Gloucester home. His love of Gloucester inspired him to write the song "Gloucester, Always Gloucester," which was performed at the Mayor Sefatia Romeo Theken's inauguration on New Year's Day, 2016. [M]



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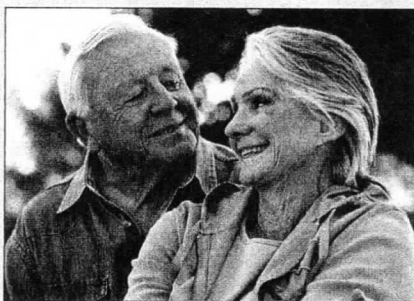
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