

A growing friendship: Neither fence nor religion divide these Framingham gardeners

By E.T. Robbins / News Correspondent

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FRAMINGHAM — You could call their fence the Great Divide except for the fact it is what brought them together.

Twenty-three years ago, Tom Winer, a self-described "Jewish boy from the city," decided he wanted to start a garden behind his Framingham home.

Winer's back yard borders a 20,000-square-foot garden on land owned by the Marist House, a Roman Catholic spiritual center. A chain link fence separates the two pieces of property.

"I started to plant, and the first year was a disaster," Winer said, "because what happened is I didn't know how to plant. I didn't know what to do or how to do it. Then I met Brother Leo who had his garden. I said to him the second year, 'What do I do?'"

Brother Leo Lapointe, a 73-year-old Marist brother with a hint of a French accent (French was his first language), chuckles at the memory.

"It was the funniest thing. We talked over the fence. He had just a few plants and the grass was growing, the weeds, and all that. He was lying on the ground, groaning — it was killing him. And over the years, he came to like it and enjoy it and now he does a good garden. I found a terrific change in him," said Lapointe.

Winer said Lapointe is the better gardener. "His tomatoes always come out bigger. His plants always come out better."

The two friends said that while they sometimes talk about religion, they mostly talk about their favorite pastime. Over the years, Lapointe has taught Winer gardening basics from weeding and watering to the tricky task of transplanting a blooming plant.

As a young boy, Lapointe worked on a dairy farm in Dracut, where he honed his farming and gardening skills.

"Another thing I taught him was he had a lot of plants too close together," Lapointe said. "I said, 'Don't put so many plants, and you'll get twice the crop.' Little by little he understood the principle of it."

"I became a little bit of a green thumb, but thanks to him," Winer said.

"Now, my goodness, I've got to slow him down," Lapointe added.

For the last three years, the gardening duo has been planting in the greenhouse on the Marist House property. In 2000, under Lapointe's tutelage, Winer planted 1,200 tomato plants, plus zucchini, summer squash, butternut squash and lettuce.

"This year we planted 1,500 plants and flowers by seed," Winer said.

Despite such a bountiful garden, Winer admitted they are slowing down due to age and physical ailments. Winer, who just turned 65, suffers from foot problems while Lapointe is still recovering from hip replacement surgery this past winter.

"We're the walking wounded," Winer joked, although he admitted he worries about his friend. Winer has taken on a lot of the physical work for both gardens this year.

"As you get a little older, it gets a little tougher and you work just a little slower. It's not that you don't have the will or the desire to do it, it's just your body doesn't do the same thing as when you were 20 or 30 or 40," Winer said.

Lapointe laughed. "He'd always slow me down. I'd work all day and, if I had a chance, at night I'd come out, and he used to get mad. He'd say, 'Get out of here. Don't work so hard. If you die, I'll kill you.'"

As for religious differences? The two men said they respect each other's beliefs, and that even a physical fence wasn't a barrier in their blossoming friendship.

Winer said, "We've had a good friendship for 20-odd years. Being able to work side by side and not worry about religion; we've never had an argument in all the years we've done things together."

Lapointe agreed. "We've always been good friends."