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Carole sows the seeds for a good life

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Carole Sousa showed up at our meeting with a typed list of talking points. Among the many things that had to be discussed: her current activities, her collection of business cards and the people she felt needed to be profiled in the pages of *The Royal Gazette*.

“I’ve always been organised,” the 70-year-old said. “Maybe I should have joined the army when I was younger.”

Three years ago, she came up with a plan to give Bermuda 100 trees before she died. Although not much of a gardener herself, her property in Warwick is littered with sour oranges, peaches, locust and wild honey, cotton and pomegranates, and she wanted to do a bit more to “leave something for the planet”.

“I started a seed charity,” she said. “I said I would give away seeds to whoever wanted them.”

Carefully factoring in loss of seedlings due to storms, accident, nature and neglect, she calculated that she had to give away about 10,000 in order to reach her goal.

“I gave myself five years to complete my mission,” she said.

The Lifelong Learning Centre put a notice about it in their newsletter; the Garden Club and Bermuda Horticultural Society also became allies. Calls and e-mails poured in from across the community.

She leaves the seeds, carefully packaged and labelled, in her mailbox.

In three years, she’s given away 8,000. Most are from her own yard, but plant enthusiasts have recently started donating theirs, which she then passes on. She never gets to meet most of the people who pick the seeds up.

“There is no way to know how many trees have resulted from that,” she said. “I can’t go to each of their houses and say, ‘Is that a seed I gave you?’”

Mrs Sousa arrived in Bermuda from Calgary, Alberta where her parents, Betty and Harry Jenkins, ran more than 40 grocery stores.

She met her Bermudian husband, Gary, while working as a realtor. He’d gone to school in Canada and had stayed there to work as an accountant; she was divorced and raising two children, Deanna and Shane, on her own.

“He wandered into one of my open houses,” she said. “I wasn’t really prepared to be married again, but he didn’t go away. He stuck it out for three years, and I came to my senses.”

They were married in 1983 and moved to Bermuda with her two children the next year. Life on the island came as a complete shock.

“Where I was from you have hard winters and you’re in the mountains or foothills,” she said. “There are no roaches or ants coming into your house, or humidity.”

She remembered finding a roach in the butter, ants in the cereal and condensation from the high humidity over everything one morning. Even her leather shoes had turned green from mildew.

“After sitting on the floor in tears, I said, ‘OK I just have to get to the bottom of these things,’” Mrs Sousa said.

She went into town to look for a book on how to survive in Bermuda and be happy, but there weren’t any. She decided to tackle each problem individually.

“I talked to lots of people, particularly older Bermudians,” she said. Among the many things she learnt: move the cereal into the fridge before summer kicks in, around the beginning of May.

Eventually, her friends started sending people who were new to the island her way.

“Some of the women coming over had never left mum’s home before coming to Bermuda,” she said.

“They didn’t know how to cook and clean. If you’re from away, all you hear is that Bermuda is paradise.”

Dealing with all the visitors soon got to be time consuming — there’d be someone knocking on the door at all times of the day — and so she decided to write a book.

In high school she’d enjoyed writing essays and some teachers suggested journalism as a career, so she was confident she could do it.

“I wasn’t sure whether it would be a best seller, whether I would lose my shirt, whether I would be disowned, deported, divorced I didn’t know,” she said.

Tea with Tracey, a chatty memoir about her first days in Bermuda, was first published in 1994.

"The book is a conversation between two ladies," she said. "We always had this huge pot of tea. *Tea with Carole*, didn't sound as good. Tracey was a fun name."

She paired it with Caswell, chosen because of an inside joke with a relative. Because people often think it's her real name, it's listed in the telephone book with her number; the message on her answering machine says, "Hi, you've reached Carole, Gary and Tracey."

Tea with Tracey has had four printings and three editions and has sold more than 18,000 copies. For years, she resisted pressure from friends and family to write another book.

"I'd done what I set out to do," she said. "I was finished. If they wanted a book they could write it themselves."

But in 2012, she finally gave in.

Twelve Nights with Tracey tells how, in 2004 wanting to give her husband a special birthday gift, she planned 12 evenings with authentic food, entertainment and decorations from various parts of the world.

The project involved the help of hundreds of others and took her five years to complete.

To anyone who asks about it she gives this advice: "Just do one theme night, not 12."

With her weight an issue, doctors wanted to put her on medication for high cholesterol and high blood pressure three years ago.

She ignored them and instead registered for exercise classes at the Lifelong Learning Centre at the Bermuda College.

She started with two courses, but today takes nine. Along the way she dropped 65lbs and no longer needs medication.

"I am normal now," she said. "I am exactly where I want to be."

• *For information on Carole Sousa's books or her seed project: 236-4092 or tracey@logic.bm. Lifestyle profiles the island's senior citizens every Tuesday. Contact Jessie Moniz Hardy on 278-0150 or jmhardy@royalgazette.com with their full name, contact details and the reason you are suggesting them*