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Northport artist, Mary Ahern conducts a virtual tour of her garden where she draws her inspiration for her artwork (left).

Garden tours offer distraction from virus

By DAVID AMBRO

If the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak is going to prevent people from coming to her garden, Northport Artist Mary Ahern is going to bring her garden to them.

Ms. Ahern is a popular local artist, her colorful floral paintings inspired by the fruitful blooms in the gardens surrounding her Northport home, which she has cultivated and tended to for more than 30 years. "My art is about translating calmness and majesty and beauty," Ms. Ahern said during a recent interview.

While Ms. Ahern's primary mission is her artwork, her gardens are her pride and joy. A graduate of the State University of New York at Farmingdale horticulture program, she is president of the Centerport Garden Club, and as such she loves to share her horticultural exploits with others, her home a regular stop on many a garden tour, including the annual Northport Historical Society Garden Tour.

As the coronavirus continues to grip the nation, however, Ms. Ahern doesn't know what will become of the annual tours and the visitors she enjoys so much walking along the serene paths through her flower beds. So, Ms. Ahern has launched a video walking tour of her garden, My Art Starts in the

Garden, episodes of which are accessible on YouTube.

"I'm an artist, but my art starts in the garden because the garden is where I get all my inspiration. All my paintings are of my garden or of particular flowers in my garden," Ms. Ahern said, adding that she has been gardening on the same Northport property for over 30 years. "All my paintings have come from this property."

Ms. Ahern said her garden is designed so that visitors can immerse themselves in it by strolling through woodland walks and pathways and every pathway forks off to different sections of the garden.

"It is a whole spiritual way of looking at it," Mr. Ahern said. "Every day when you go out, it is like a meditation where you can go in a different direction on a different path and see something different. It's like meditating."

The first of the garden tours was filmed March 21 and it is online now. It is a walk through the garden in early spring. But because of the mild winter, it is already lush with growth, buds, and early blooms. As the growing season progresses, Ms. Ahern intends to produce additional videos to share on line. To access the videos go to YouTube and search for "My Art Starts in the Garden."

"It is something that needs to be shared otherwise it is just me looking at it day after

day. I love sharing the garden and the only way I can do that during this time is to do these virtual garden tours," she said. "In the spring things open up daily and the garden changes constantly."

"So, I think this is a great way to have people who are stuck in the house now or who are housebound or don't have their own gardens to give them some relaxing pleasure," Ms. Ahern said.

During these days of the COVID-19 outbreak, Ms. Ahern said gardening is a healthy way to get out in the fresh air and be active where you don't have to be near other people while being totally immersed in nature and in the spiritual part of nature.

"It brings me very close to the roots of who I am as a human being and who we all are and how we are relying on each other," Ms. Ahern said. "All of the plants in the garden and pollinators and the soil and the worms and everything that is in the garden, we are all interconnected, and I am just one of those interconnections in the garden."

"I'm not alone in the garden, and yet I'm not going to catch the virus, I'm not going to catch anything because I'm not there with the contagion. I'm there in a healthy environment but I'm never alone in the garden," Ms. Ahern said.

Ms. Ahern said she

remembers the terror among people in the days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks—"I was in terror then and we really didn't now the extent of how bad it was going to be"—and that she also remembers getting a polio shot as a child and how exciting people thought it was that a cure had been found. "So I do take this extremely seriously. I'm not casual about it at all. But I also know that being outside, we are not catching it from the air and it is very healthy being out," she said.

In addition to her YouTube videos, Ms. Ahern said she is also working on creating Zoom meetings with her garden club so they can get reconnected during the COVID-19 outbreak. She said a majority of the club members are between 60 and 80 years old and they are a vulnerable population. She is making tutorials and other programs that they can get online without being exposed to the virus. "People need it. People need the connection," she said.

The tutorials will show people how to plant seeds, how to do floral arrangements. She said it is uncertain what changes will come out of the scourge caused by the coronavirus, but she does think that education is going to be changed forever and more and more of it is going to be offered online. "It is going to be remarkable."

With the coronavirus continuing to ravage communities around the globe, Ms. Ahern said now more than ever is a time to bring happiness and calmness into our lives, and like many people she finds solace in the garden. She encouraged people to take a break from their isolation and take a walk with her in the garden.

"Flowers, to me, are a microcosm of the universe in that the flowers are there for one day and their sole purpose is to survive, to survive one season or one generation, a generation just like human beings," she said. "So when I see something that comes into bloom, to me, the amazing effort of the plant to put out this amazing color and form and architecture of the flower, to create a community of pollinators so that it can continue with its existence, is very similar to the way that we are."

"We have communities as human beings and we rely on each other to survive and flourish. I don't see us any differently. So when I am working or walking in my garden these are the types of things that I am meditating upon," Ms. Ahern said. "The way that we are as human beings, and the way flowers are and the whole environment of the garden is a synergy that we are all working together and it is what is behind my work."