



Garden artists join with charity to find a cure for brain cancer.

By Chaitali B. Roy
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The cornice in Kuwait is a major landmark and prominent foreground to the city skyline with its winding paths, parks, and beaches. It is marked at its southern end by the Scientific Centre and its northernmost point by Kuwait Towers. Comprising of more than 10 km, it includes coffee houses and restaurants from which to watch the sunset or enjoy the sea breeze. More than four decades ago, London based Brian Clouston and Partners, once one of the largest landscape architecture practices in Europe designed, composed and developed the cornice area from a soft irregular shoreline on which pearling and trading boats beached during the pre-oil years to a large public and pedestrian space forming the backbone of an urban park system featuring basins, water fountains, playgrounds, cafes and restaurants. One of the youngest members of the Brian Clouston team was Rosemary Alexander, a trained landscape architect who later evolved into a giant of modern garden designing. She was a junior member of the team in London that worked on the design of the cornice gardens. "I did not play much part in the design, mostly helping with the drawings and presentation work," she recalls in an exclusive interview to Arab Times. "I do remember there was much discussion about saving some of the historic gateways from being destroyed. It was over 40 years ago." Recalling the cornice project, the gardening guru says, "When I moved to London, the firm I worked for was doing a lot of work in Oman (gardens for palaces), Makkah and Madinah (designing safari parks), and for Kuwait. In Kuwait, plans were drawn up to create a cornice development alongside the ocean, similar to the one in Nice, in the South of France. My responsibility was to collate the surveys and plans sent or brought back by male landscape architects who worked in Kuwait. I remember cuttings out the outline of the coast and sticking our new plans down to form the Corniche."

Rosemary Alexander is in Kuwait this week to open the Kuwaiti-British Floral Art Exhibition which will coincide with the start of a yearlong celebration to mark the 120th anniversary of the British-Kuwaiti Friendship Treaty. A combination of British and Kuwaiti artists have been working together, basing their work on flowers found in the well-planted garden of the British Ambassador's Residence, formerly the British Political Agency. Members of the Kuwait Textile Arts Association (KTAA), including prize-winning quilt artist Hanan Alkazemi, will participate. Proceeds from the sale of the exhibits will go to The Rudy A Menon Foundation, a British charity that funds research into Gliomatosis Cerebri and other rare brain cancers. "I am so excited by this initiative and cannot wait to see how these talented women artists have been inspired by our garden, thereby also supporting the pioneering work of 'The Rudy A Menon Foundation,'" said H.E. the British Ambassador Michael Davenport.

England is known as a nation of gardeners with some of the most sublime gardens and country parks in the world, so much so that 2016 was officially declared the Year of the English Garden. Rosemary Alexander (RHS) is an internationally renowned British garden designing artist who has worked her magic and cultivated wondrous beauty in some of the well-known gardens in the UK. "I have known Rosemary ever since our first posting in Poland in the early 1990s when her husband, the well-known and beloved British Judge George Dobry, worked with my husband on a scheme called the Know-How Fund which helped post-Communist countries create a new normality," says Dr Lavinia Davenport, wife of the British ambassador who has been working on the concept of the exhibition since last Spring. "When back in England, we would visit Rosemary's beautiful house and garden in the country where we would enjoy not only the beauty and uniqueness of her creation but also meet the illustrious and often exotic students of her famous English Gardening School in Chelsea. There was always a fascinating blend of good British food — Rosemary is an excellent cook — and international conversation as many of her students come from faraway lands. I am thrilled that she has agreed to come to this far away land and co-open our Kuwaiti-British floral exhibition with the inspiring Sheikha Altaf Salem Al Sabah patron and honorary president of Sadu House."

Born, brought up and educated in Scotland, Rosemary is a landscape architect. Apart from working her emerald fingers in creating artforms out of gardens, she also lectures and writes prolifically on the subject. For her contribution to her art, Rosemary Alexander was the first woman to be elected a Fellow of the Society of Garden Designers (now recognised by being made an honorary life member of the Society). It is interesting that for a nation of passionate gardeners, with iconic names such as Gertrude Jekyll, Vita Sackville, Lady Londonderry and many others owning and creating some of the most famous British gardens, women gardeners are rarely celebrated. "At that time there were not many female garden designers," says Alexander of her initial entry into the elite organization. "At the first SGD meeting of 5 men, I think they thought they ought to have a 'token' woman, so I was asked to join them."

To design a garden is to manipulate and organize three-dimensional space into a living theatre inhabited by elements that are unpredictable and forever changing. In this art form, which is rooted in science, plants and pretty flowers do contribute to creating beauty, but at the same time designing involves spatial awareness, paving, lighting and drainage systems, and a need to make sense of the context of the space in relation to the immediate landscape. "Garden designers replan a whole space using landscape contractors to build it," says Rosemary Alexander. "Garden designers draw a proposed layout and planting plan and set out the plants. Occasionally those trained in horticulture go on to train as garden designers."

Rosemary Alexander grew up in a family of passionate female gardeners in Scotland. "Like many British people, my grandmother and mother were keen gardeners. My first married home in Scotland had quite a large garden, and I employed a landscape architect to help me replan it. When my children went to boarding school, I spent much of my spare time visiting gardens and learning plant names. "For eleven years she was a tenant of the National Trust property Stoneacre in Kent, where she transformed the gardens. She relocated to Hampshire in 2001 where she created a new smaller garden, the subject of many articles. At present, she combines teaching worldwide with maintaining her own garden and has written several books.

In 1983, Alexander founded the English Gardening School at the historic Chelsea Physic Garden to provide serious training in gardening techniques, knowledge of plants plus garden layout and design possibilities. "I founded The English Gardening School in 1983 as at that stage there were only courses for training professional gardeners and nothing for the enthusiastic amateur," recalls Alexander. "Our courses were very popular, and we also did a lot of visiting gardens outside London, travelling by private coach and taking a picnic lunch. I also began judging for the Royal Horticultural Society at their various shows including the Chelsea Flower Show. In 2011 I was awarded the RHS Veitch Memorial Medal by Princess Alexandra in recognition of promoting garden design as a profession. Many famous gardening personalities have been trained at my school." When asked if enrolment to the school is open to gardening enthusiasts in Kuwait, she answered, "Students are mostly between 30 and 60 years old and come from all continents — South Korea/ Ukraine /USA/ Australia and Russia for example. The most popular course is one day per week (Tuesdays) for an academic year. Full details can be found on our website — www.englishgardening-school.co.uk. My books which are in 10 languages are also worth studying. The Essential Garden Design Workbook (3rd edition) is highly regarded as the best and most thorough book on the subject and studying this is less expensive than coming to London. We also provide distance learning courses which students do by correspondence from all over the world as long as they speak English."

Most good gardens are created through a passion for plants. Rosemary Alexander's current garden is one acre in Hampshire where she has created a space brimming with life, shapes and colours. While sharing her observation on what Kuwait can do to improve its green spaces, she says, "Plants are the 'lungs' of a city. Creating more public open and planted spaces will help improve the air and atmosphere. In Makkah and Madinah, birds which had not been seen for decades started returning after plants were established."



Rosemary Alexander in her garden.

garden artists seed hope in the fight against brain cancer

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