

Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us

Episode #83 : Meet: Betty Lou Sandy

<https://www.judithdreyer.com>

Welcome everyone to my podcast series The Holistic Nature of Us. I invite you to take a journey with me into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties us directly to the natural world around us. My intention is to be your guide for this half hour as we begin seeing our world with fresh eyes, gaining more understanding and learning how can connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us.

I feature a broad range of guests deeply concerned about the environmental issues of our time and more; authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth and for all species help us create sustainable bridges of understanding. These folks are innovators. They're action oriented, creating solutions in a variety of ways that honor us and the planet's holistic nature. I am so honored to share their stories, their projects, and their passion with all of you. So today I thank you for joining us today for another engaging interview.

I'm delighted to introduce you to Betty Lou Sandy. She offers organic gardening education and consultation, including landscape design. And spring arrived today so we're all anxious to get outside, dig in the dirt and get some landscaping tips.

So welcome Betty Lou. It's a pleasure to have you here.

BETTY LOU: Thank you Judith for having me on your program.

JUDITH: Well let's start with you. You've got a lot of gardening and landscaping experience. Tell us a little something about your journey and what you love about what you do.

BETTY LOU: I've been a professional gardener for 33 years starting in the spring of 1987. In 1989 people wanted to learn to do things for themselves, so I started doing gardening consultation and personal training for the do-it-yourselfer, as well as seminars at gardening centers and eventually at colleges. I started out in Wilton, Connecticut until 1985. I moved to

Putnam Connecticut to help my parents and then in 2000 I came to Manchester Connecticut where I still reside. This has been a passion of mine all my life, gardening, and enjoying the natural world around and seeing the patterns of nature and how we can interact with it naturally. I'm an organic gardener and I was an accredited landscape professional, organic landscape professional from Connecticut NOFA and the interstate NOFA Council, which is part of the Northeast Organic Farming Association that also trains landscape professionals. So I've been accredited since 2005 for all aspects of landscape and gardening. I love teaching people

JUDITH: That's impressive. I bet you've had such great interactions with folks as you work with their landscape. Most of us are concerned about doing things organically. I know there are some people out there who just want us to get rid of the weeds and get rid of them now, which is not always a healthy thing to do for our land, never mind the residual affects for ourselves. So let's talk a little bit more about how you would approach a land and what do you look for; what do you do? I know you have such practical tips. I've so enjoyed talking with you about this subject.

BETTY LOU: Well first of all I like to look at what's growing naturally where you are. In your lawn you might have more than just the traditional perennial rye grass, or fescue or blue grass. You might have things like dandelions, and plantain and a variety of other things that grow. Each one of these weeds, as you might consider them, is actually an herb or a medicinal plant or a vegetable. That also tells you what kind of soil you have, because in organic gardening everything begins with the soil and your success will depend on the kind of soil you have.

When designing a landscape or redesigning a landscape, as is probably the case with most people, I like to look at the whole landscape. I like to consider not only what is growing there now, but what would you like to grow? Where does the sun come from? How much sun and shade do you get and in what areas? Because each area of our yard is a microclimate, meaning that different things will grow in different parts of your yard and garden. I like to include curved lines in everything rather than straight lines. They're more natural and pleasing to the eye. It's also easier if you're going to be mowing a lawn because you go in a way that you would naturally walk. We don't walk at right angles or not necessarily straight lines. So when you're planning your design or redesign you want to consider what is

most comfortable to walk, and that's going to be the most pleasing to the eye for you and others who are observing.

JUDITH: That's true. You know when we drive by neighborhoods, I've often seen straight lines from the front door down to the sidewalk and unless there are plantings around that, or a little gate or something, I find it very boring number one. Number two from a feng shui point of view, which is the right use of space. It's not necessarily a good thing either. So curving creates the flow like a river. It creates that pattern of slow movement that I think is very pleasing to a yard or a landscape.

BETTY LOU: I agree wholeheartedly. For those familiar with feng shui that is the whole feat of nature. When you look at the way a natural area is growing, there are no straight lines. It's more curved and it's a marvelous thing to mimic. We want to be more relaxed in our yard, and so for that we use something called judicious laziness. So, you're not going to be tending constantly. You're not going to be stressed about what's out of place. You're going to allow nature to take its course in some direction. We can guide it on our own and we can plant some things that we know are going to do well in that place but not stress about what is growing and what isn't growing and how.

JUDITH: Good. That's very good information. So let's get a little bit more specific about that. So you're going to look at where the sun is. You're going to look at what's there. What happens when you get to a property that has a lot of invasives where the root structures have just completely taken over a space?

BETTY LOU: Well, this is a great time to start thinking about those things. I use something called a **digging fork** and every gardener probably has one. If not, you ought to just pick one up at a tag sale. They have very sturdy tines. Those are the prongs of the fork and it's meant for heavy-duty digging. It can get around roots. It can get around rocks. It can loosen soil without damaging the plantings around it. I like to go around the perimeter of the vines to wedge up the plant, two or three areas around the roots will then lift it up out of the ground, or just enough so that you can pull it out. The only way to deal with pesky vines and brambles that you don't want there is to get them out by the roots; otherwise, they'll just keep coming up. I know many people who cut them back to the ground, but they'll crop up again and they don't understand why it keeps coming back. And it's because the root

is very stubborn and wants to continue to grow. It's a survival skill. Much like any of us we want to live and so the plants are going to do the same thing unless you just pull them out by the roots.

JUDITH: Yeah that's another good point. We forget that some of the plants propagate in different ways, you know? And some of our more invasive plants that take over a landscape have very tenacious root systems, which is why they're so successful and they crowd out other plants. So getting a digging fork is a very practical suggestion for gardeners if they don't have one.

BETTY LOU: Another thing would be to identify what these vines are. I have walked around properties with clients periodically. They'll want to include edibles in their yard and I'll come upon something that looks very familiar and I'll say, "Oh, would you like some raspberries or blackberries in your yard? And they say, "oh yes". I said well you've got some here and they said, "Oh, I thought these were just prickly bushes and I didn't know that they could do that. So we cultivated what was naturally growing there, that had previously been considered a problem. So frequently people have edibles in their yard and don't even realize it.

JUDITH: That's interesting because we think of the brambles as just being a nuisance. But how would you get someone to get the fruit to produce in that situation, so they have an edible there?

BETTY LOU: (over talking) Oh, I'm sorry.

JUDITH: No, that's okay. It's just so that they have the edible in their landscape if they think of it as a prickly vine, they may not be getting any fruit.

BETTY LOU: That's correct. People will mow them down or cut them down and they keep coming back because they reproduce by sending up their rhizomes. That's a root that goes parallel to the surface of the soil and then sends down living roots deeper into the soil so that they can push up their vines and canes as they're called. What I recommend is digging an edge around those vines, or brambles and cultivating them. I would even use leaves as mulch around these things but dig...a Victorian edge, which is a cut in edge to direct the water flow from the rain and so forth, into the soil to where the roots are. I allow the canes to grow. They'll be about three feet high. They will normally grow about eight or ten feet and bend over but

having a shorter cane, especially in the first year you're cultivating, you'll concentrate all the energy into the rhizome and encourage the roots to take hold. Then the following year they'll send up an additional cane and start to produce fruit. In subsequent years I keep the canes to about six feet in length at the most. That cane will fruit and in the following year it will die off but another cane will take its place. So there's a rhythm where you have a new cane for this year that is going to fruit the following year and then another cane that's going to die after it produces fruit, and so forth. So having edibles does take a little bit of tending and know how but it's more worth it to own raspberries and blueberries and blackberries. I'm on a blueberry track.

JUDITH: Yeah, I agree. Do you recommend cutting them back in the fall down to the ground or in the early spring down to the ground?

BETTY LOU: The dead cane I would cut down to the ground in the spring when you start seeing foliage appear. But the canes that have foliage on them and living buds I would keep at three feet until they start to sprout, and you can see the new canes coming through. At that time when they're in full foliage I would cut them back to about six feet so that the sap and the good nutrients are concentrated into a shorter space to support the fruit and have larger and more delicious fruit.

JUDITH: Yeah, I've seen some of that at work. Some folks that have taken good care of the raspberry and blackberry bushes and they do everything that you say in terms of cutting them back and trying to manage them a little bit better. I like the idea of that Victorian edge, cutting the edge in, because that's a really good way for weed management around plants too, and as you said, it's very good for water drainage. Raspberries tend to need a little bit more than some of the other fruits, so they do well in a rainy summer, and they seem to do well if they're on land that has maybe some marshland, or it's more moist, that type of a typography.

BETTY LOU: You're so right and I encourage people to give careful thought as to where you're going to be raising your raspberries. They make a nice hedge and they also will, if you've got a place in a more urban setting or some urban setting and sometimes people walk across a corner of your yard, you might want to put in your brambles there.

JUDITH: Yeah that's a good idea.

BETTY LOU: It will also encourage birds to come by because they'll want to eat the fruit as they are looking for food, especially in the fall. There are many different ways to consider including other edibles such as blueberry bushes. There are high bush blueberries and low bush blueberries. One of the benefits is not only the food they provide, but also the beautiful red color in the fall. When I design a landscape, I like you to consider all the different seasons and color from them all, as well as durable permanence. And the blueberry bushes will give you some vertical permanence. Meaning that there's something there in that space even through the winter. The bushes will be standing there without foliage but they still have a texture. And again, if you're going to have them against the house make sure they're at least six feet away from the house to allow them enough air circulation and sunshine to get the back of the bush as well as the front. They do make a nice foundation planting. I use them myself.

JUDITH: But that's another good point that you're bringing out. We forget that, you know, we want a bush here; we want a bush there; we want plants here; we want plants there, but we forget where we're putting them could be a microclimate. So anything that goes up against a house or a foundation, you really have to watch the sun to see if it gets...it could get five degrees or more heat than three feet away that's not next to the foundation. So we have to be mindful of that with our plantings.

BETTY LOU: That's right. Otherwise we'll end up with dead stalks on one side of the shrub and nice and green and bushy on the front. But if you allow enough space, then it will protect the shrub and help it to be healthy for many years to come and also protect the house.

JUDITH: Yeah that's another good point, you know, how we can take care of our homes using plants instead of the other way around. So I really like that suggestion. Blueberries are one of my favorites.

Do you have any experience in this area for planting cranberries as an edible in the landscape?

BETTY LOU: I do not because I think we're a little far north but with climate change there are many things that we're starting to be able to grow that we haven't been able to in the past.

JUDITH: Could you give us some examples?

BETTY LOU: Sure. I specialize in vegetable gardening and I've noticed that many of our warm weather vegetables like tomatoes and squash family and so forth, can grow and produce into October and sometimes even November, where it used to be you had to stop...those plants would stop growing and producing by mid September. But now they're into November. There are cold weather crops that I encourage people to use that we can plant earlier and earlier in the spring but in the fall. August is now the time and they will produce into November as well. We have a lot of cold weather crops that can go all the way through the winter without any special protection such as broccoli, brussel sprouts, kale – they can all grow through the winter here in Connecticut. I'm in Northeastern Connecticut. And we can be harvesting them right through the winter. I harvested kale in January and February this year. I was harvesting brussel sprouts in February and still now in March, all of them what I planted last April. Go ahead.

JUDITH: Betty Lou let me ask you a question here. Do you need special equipment in the wintertime to keep them growing?

BETTY LOU: No, not at all. I use raised beds primarily for my vegetable growing, which I also intermit with flowers to keep away bugs. But they just grow without any covering through the winter because they're cold hardy and they tend to be sweeter after the frost because nature uses sugar as an antifreeze. So it's just a wonder to me what nature will do with its edibles so that we can have food all year long.

JUDITH: Yeah that's really interesting. We know that the zones are changing in the gardening world from where they were even just ten years ago. Things are a little bit warmer. And you're right, come the end of the year, I know a couple of years ago we didn't even have a frost until December here in New England. So the frost is getting later. I used to go out and gather roots such as dandelion root in my garden for medicinal purposes and would wait until the first frost in September, maybe the beginning of October and I'd go out in the cold and dig up the roots. But now the plants are still green. We haven't had a deep cold frost until later in the year.

BETTY LOU: That's right. I'm glad you brought up dandelions because they're one of those wonderful plants that have been misaligned by so many people. They were literally brought over by the colonists back in the 1600's as a vegetable as well as a medicinal herb and in the fall, when you harvest

the roots after the frost, all of the good energy and nutrients have gone down into the roots because perennial herbs, vegetables, flowers, even shrubs and trees, they will draw all of their nutrients down into their roots to save them for the winter so they will be sustained. And they work on the root system through the winter. The dandelions, you've got a bulk of nutrients in the roots in the fall that you wouldn't have in the spring. But just like in the spring you can harvest the dandelion foliage; in the fall it will be sweeter and more tender.

JUDITH: Well again, that's another plant. The early colonist brought it over for a reason, you know? They brought in their food and medicine sources and so forth to this country when they began to settle here. And they brought in some plants that we consider weeds. I know goldenrod, for example, is a cultivated plant in gardens in Europe but we consider it a pesky weed here in our fields. Yet it has value from food that's used in the food industry, and you can make a tea out of it. It's great if you have allergies you can kind of desensitize yourself a little bit in a specific way. And that's not the subject of this podcast but just letting other people know that there are possibilities there that we ignore when we label something in a negative way.

BETTY LOU: I agree and that's the beauty of considering edibles in the landscape. Considering what you have and including things that you can eat all through the year and still have it look like a nicely tended, but relaxed, landscape.

JUDITH: Yeah and we can start using our front yards more for food production too. That's an area that I don't think has quite caught on here in the U.S. I know it's very popular in other countries and some of the front yards that I've seen, granted they are smaller spaces, but they're beautiful. They have either gates or they have their beds set up so that there's flowers mixed in with their vegetables. And, as one thing dies off, something else comes into bloom and they manage it, but why not? Why do we have to just think of our backyard as our garden?

BETTY LOU: Exactly. There are so many things you can do in the front yard. You can plant fruit trees that give you beautiful color in the springtime and then food in the fall. You can plant vines on a trellis and so forth. You can have a nice arbor that is beautiful and welcomes you into the next room of your landscape. Lots of different vegetables as well as fruits will grow on vines, will grow on structures. And that gives you vertical components also,

as well as different colors and opportunities at different times of the season. Grape vines for instance on an arbor are quite beautiful. They need a little tending of course of pruning and fertilizing but having your own grapes, clusters of grapes hanging down from your arbor. Or you can have cucumbers and varieties of squash going up an arbor. You can have all kinds of other vines like peas in the springtime that are followed by string beans, that are followed by more peas in August and you're eating from that the whole season. Using nasturtiums as an annual border. Nasturtiums are a wonderful vegetable and they give a nice zest to your salads. The blossoms can also be eaten and are very prized by many chefs.

JUDITH: That's true. Nasturtiums are one of my favorite flowers to plant and I love putting them in a salad. They have like a little peppery taste to them but it's a nice addition to a summer salad or a garnish on a barbeque kind of picnic. They're just beautiful and yet they're edible. So I thank you for reminding us about nasturtiums.

Betty Lou, as we're getting ready to close here, I always like my guest to give three tips that people can apply today. What would you like to suggest?

BETTY LOU: Well first of all, based on our conversation, I don't want people to try and do it all at once. **Start with one space** and then build on your success. **Plan ahead for a full landscape and a full year of food** as you plan. **Pace yourself. Take before and after pictures.** Go to four different angles of your yard and then repeat the process every month to see your progress. The key is to have various plants blooming into a different time period. Edibles are going to be throughout the year. You can plant peas right now. You can plant your salad greens right now. They just like some good sun. They like the cooler weather and a little bit of lime in the soil will also be helpful. But I hope people will reevaluate their landscape and have a good time out there. Just pace yourself and don't stress, relax.

JUDITH: Well we certainly may have enough time to get going this year with everything happening in the outside world, so I think it's exciting to think about what else we can add to our yards that's edible and you gave us some really great ideas. Did you have anything else to add before we close off?

BETTY LOU: Consider harvesting some of your rainwater and instead of using gutters to push the water away from the house, consider some **French**

drains as well as Victorian edging. That will capture the water and manage it better so that it can automatically water the plantings that you have in the yard and the natural rainwater is so much better than municipal water that you would get out of your tap. It's much easier to harvest the natural water than to think about having to water. It will be better for your soil and you'll encourage all the biodiversity in your soil. And the biodiversity and earthworms are the ones who do the really hard work in the garden. So let nature take care of your garden and you just follow the pattern of the natural world and you'll be so much happier.

JUDITH: Oh that's great. Thank you and reminding us about harvesting the rainwater. I know people are getting a little more savvy about that but it's always a good reminder to capture as much as we can, because we don't know what's going to happen. Are we going to be really hot this year or are we going to have a lot of rain this year? Climate wise we don't know. It's a big unknown. So I want to thank you again for that.

BETTY LOU: My pleasure.

JUDITH: All right, well Betty Lou all I can say is I'm inspired by your talk and practical advice.

This is Judith Dreyer. I'm the author of "At the Garden's Gate", book and blog. My book is available through my website www.judithdreyer.com as well as several distribution arms such as Amazon, Nook, Goodreads and more. I'd like to remind all of you that a transcript is available for each podcast. And please like and share these podcasts. Let's get the word out and support each other.

And remember, **now** is the time for practical action and profound inner change so we value our world again.

Enjoy your day.