

A LIGHT IN THE NIGHT

The Story
of the
Magic Primrose

by Tina James

Illustrations by Josh Dorman

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Hats off to Jane Taylor, miracle worker and Curator of the 4-H Children's Garden at Michigan State University, for her encouragement and support.

The beautiful moonlight tepee was designed by Deb Kinney, landscape architect. Campus Parks & Planning, Michigan State University.

Thanks also to visionary illustrator Josh Dorman for creating such delightful images. You gave the words dancing shoes!

And here's a big hug for Gerry Pilachowski of Bane Bones Design who somehow made everything fit and patiently punched in all the changes, even when I said there wouldn't be any. Thanks, Ger!

This book is self published by the author. For more information and additional copies, contact:

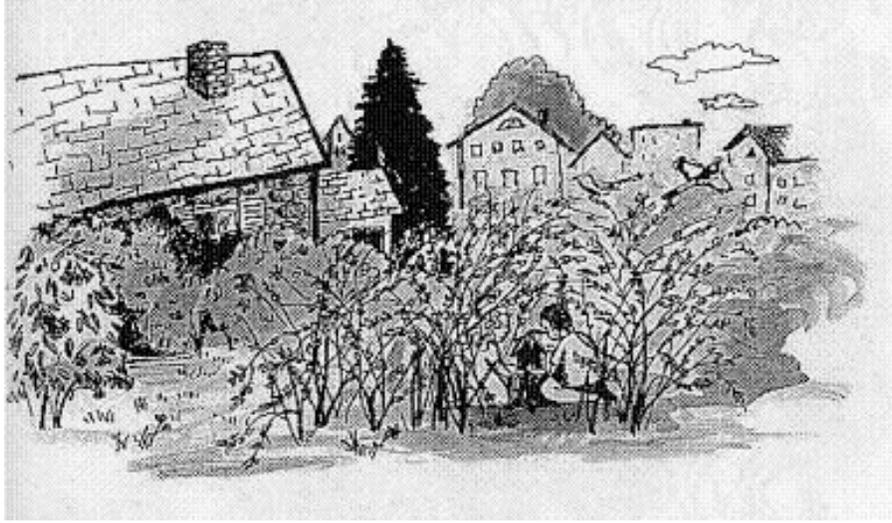
Gardening from the Heart
updated online April, 2017
www.TinaBeneman.com

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This book is dedicated to three plant lovers
who shone the light of encouragement on me:

Roy Bolyard
Jean Worthley
Adele Rush

And to Nelle Margaret and Evan,
children who are true in my heart



Ever since school let out Nelle Margaret and Evan play every day in the park behind their neighborhood. They have a secret place between the back of Mr. Buttons' house and the hedge of pyracantha bushes where the mockingbirds nest. There's just enough space underneath the forsythia for them to work on their special project.

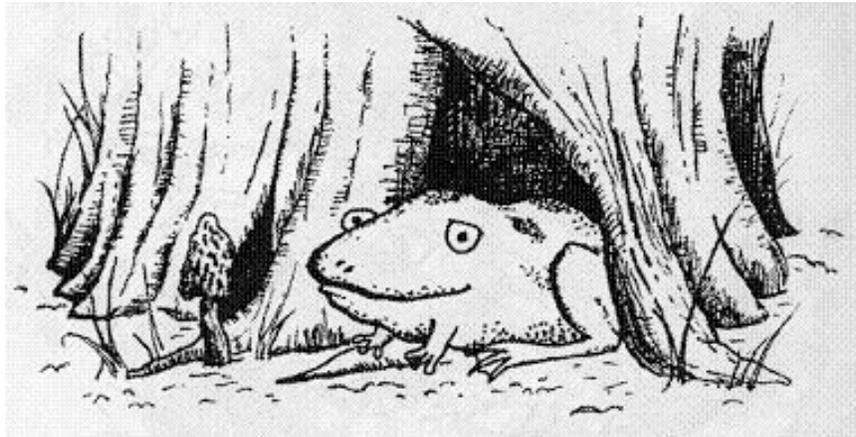


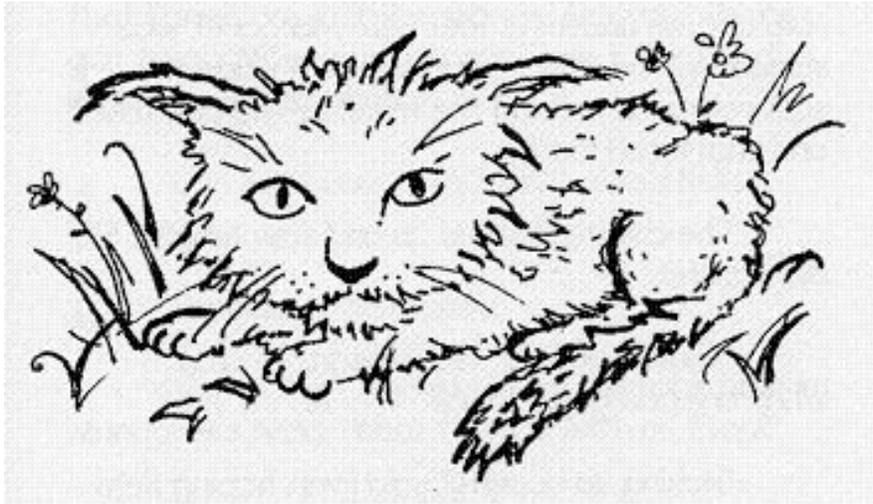


"Look what I found," announced Evan "This mushroom could make a nice table for the fairies."

"Oh, yes" exclaimed Nelle Margaret. "That's perfect. Let's go find some acorns for teacups."

Nelle Margaret reached for her basket. A speckled brown toad hopped to the side. "Do you want to come with us, Jasper?" Evan asked. The toad squeezed himself closer into the crevices of the stump.





"You and Jasmine watch out for any fairies," instructed Nelle Margaret. Jasmine was Mr. Buttons' cat. She opened one eye for a second, then went back to sleep.

Evan wasn't sure he believed in fairies but he certainly hoped they would appear. They were building such a fine house. "How big do you think they are?" he wondered aloud.

"The house is just the right size," answered Nelle Margaret.

"But I'm not sure about the furniture. Do you suppose fairies would rather sit or just float?"

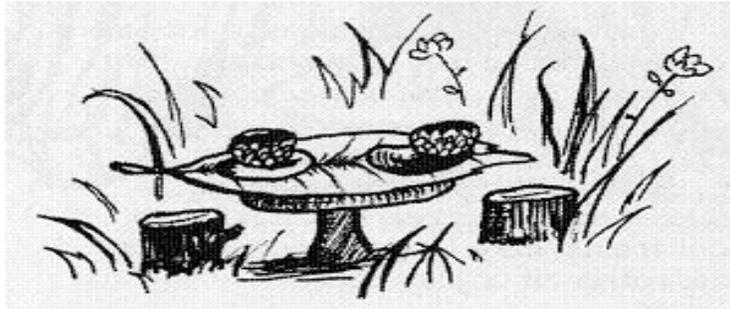
Evan was thinking about designs for floating furniture when he felt the crunch of rolling acorns under his feet. Nelle Margaret was inspecting the nuts to find the best caps. A squirrel raced around the trunk of the oak tree and chattered loudly.

The children looked up and saw Nelle's older sister.

"There you are." said Alison. "Hi Evan. What are you guys doing?"

"Picking up acorns," said Evan. hoping Nelle would keep quiet.

"We're making a fairy house." Nelle Margaret told her sister excitedly. "These will be teacups. And we'll use rose petals for plates. Evan found a mushroom just the right size for a table. Don't you want to see?"



"A fairy house?" Alison sighed. "Oh, Nelle. When you're a fifth grader like me, you'll know that fairies are just for stories. Anyway, we've got to go. Mom says you can come back for a little while after dinner."

"Can you come then, Evan?" asked Nelle Margaret.

"Probably." he replied.

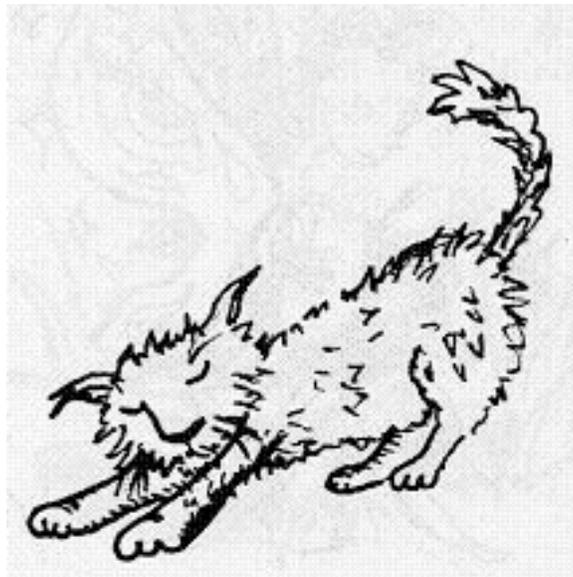
"Gotta' fly," said Alison as she took Nelle Margaret's hand. "Want to walk with us, Evan?"

"No, thanks. 'Bye. Nelle."



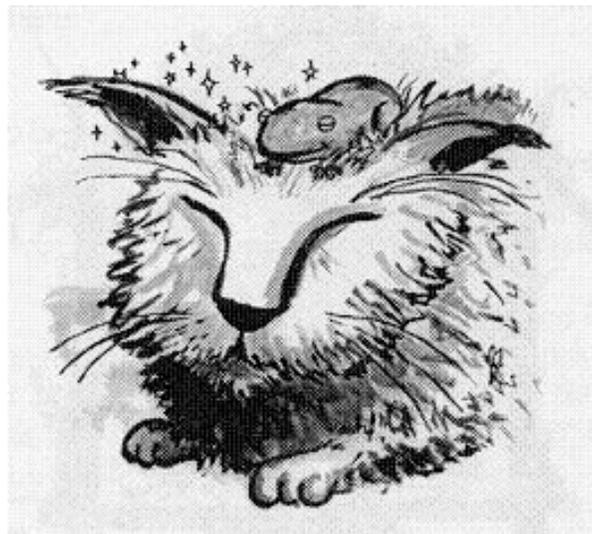
Evan walked toward the secret place. He felt a little sick. Was he too big of a boy to believe in fairies? When he thought about Nelle Margaret, his heart sank to his toes. She had sat next to him at lunch the first day of second grade back when he didn't know anybody. Best friends forever, they had vowed. But he had already noticed that older boys didn't play much with girls.

Evan crawled in under the tangled forsythia branches. He sat for a while, plunking acorns at a rock. What if Alison was right? What good is a fairy house if there are no fairies? When he ran out of acorns, Jasmine gave a big stretch and hopped into his lap. Her tail tickled Evans's nose.



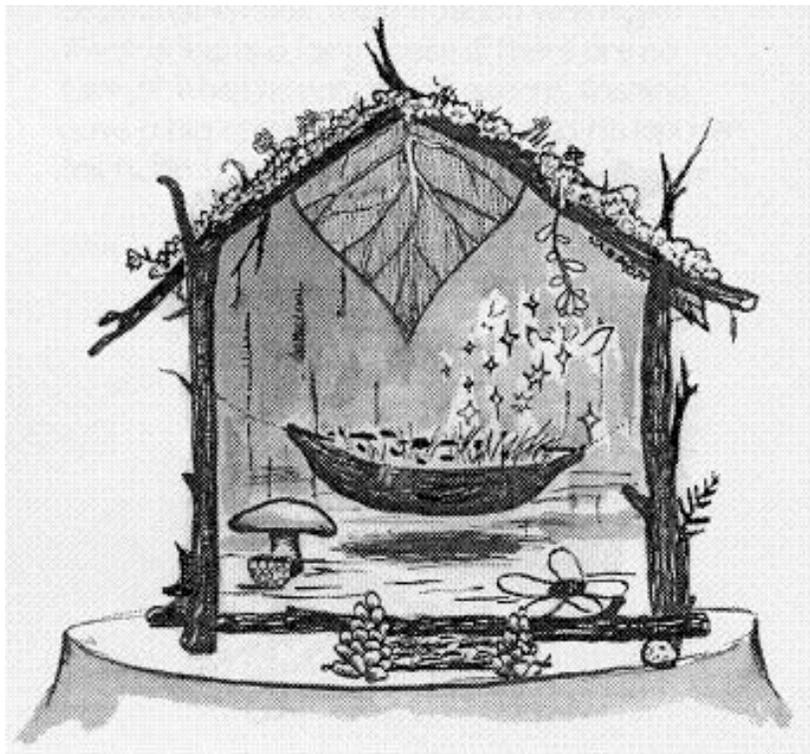
Evan chuckled. Even if fairies aren't real, he and Nelle Margaret were having fun. "It can be a toad house," he announced aloud. "We'll leave honey on the rose petals and that will attract flies for Jasper to eat."

Evan hugged Jasmine so hard she leaped off his lap. He picked Jasper up gently and put him on the bed Nelle Margaret had lined with lamb's ear leaves. "Yep, this can be a toad house all right. Nelle Margaret will never have to know."



Later that day, long after dinner, Nelle Margaret and Evan put the finishing touches on a piece of fairy furniture made from a milkweed pod. Evan hung the pod using fishing line. Nelle stood back to look. "It doesn't even show." she exclaimed. "You did it. Evan! It's a floating chaise lounge."

Evan knew that Jasper probably couldn't use this particular part of the house but he didn't want to spoil Nelle Margaret's fun. "We'd better go," he said. "It's getting dark."





They decided to take a short cut through Mr. Buttons' yard. even though it was a little scary to find their way through the tall weeds. Mr. Buttons used to have a beautiful garden but ever since his wife died, he hardly even came outdoors.

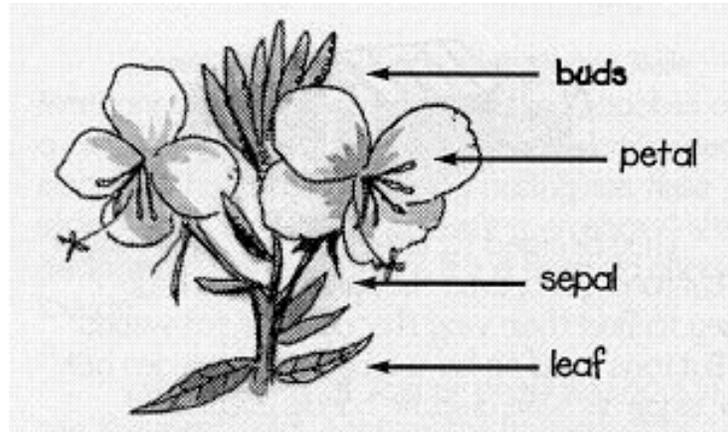
As they walked past the shed behind their secret place, they noticed a patch of bright yellow flowers growing against the old building.

"Wow!" said Evan. "Those are really pretty. Too bad no one sees them here."

Nelle Margaret put her nose right into the flower. "Mmm, these smell good too. Lemony like."

Suddenly, just to his right, Evan saw a flash of light. Could it be a fairy? He stepped back to get a wider view. And there, right before his eyes, he watched a yellow flower bud open up all by itself.

He looked at Nelle Margaret. She had seen it too.



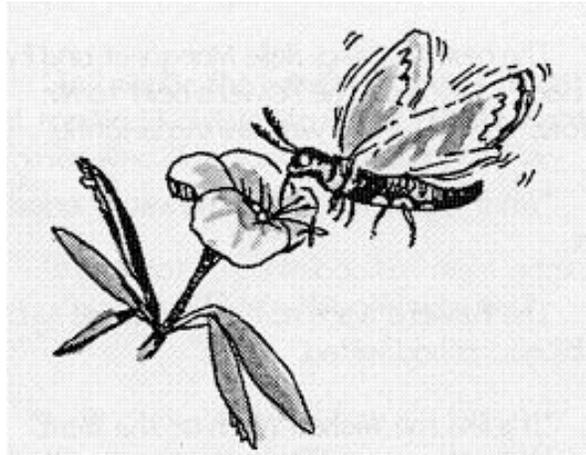
"Fairies!" breathed Nelle Margaret "I knew they would come."

"There goes another one!" shouted Evan, as another flower popped open. He wasn't sure what was happening and there wasn't time to think.

They watched and counted as twenty-one more blossoms spun open. First, the sepals flipped back. Next, the petals seemed to take in a breath, quiver and then, she-zam! A glowing yellow flower unfolded as if untwirled by a hidden hand.

"It's like watching slow motion photography," said Evan.

"Look! Look!" cried Nelle Margare. A huge moth landed on a flower blossom and took a long drink of the sweet nectar.



Just then, Nelle Margaret heard Alison calling her. "Over here!" Nelle Margaret shouted back to her. "Come see what we found."

"Can't you see it's dark," scolded Alison. "We were worried about you."

Nelle Margaret could hardly speak. "Alison! The fairies were here! We watched them open these flowers. And then a huge moth appeared. At first I thought it was a bat but it was a moth and it drank the flower honey."

Alison was not impressed. "Nelle Margaret, if you don't come home on time, Mom isn't going to

let you play outside after dinner. Let's get going.
You too, Evan. Your father already called our
house."

The next morning, Nelle Margaret and Evan ran back to look at the flowers next to Mr. Buttons' shed. The sun was shining brightly.

"What happened to the flowers?" cried Evan.

The flowers were not pretty at all. All of the blossoms had wilted.

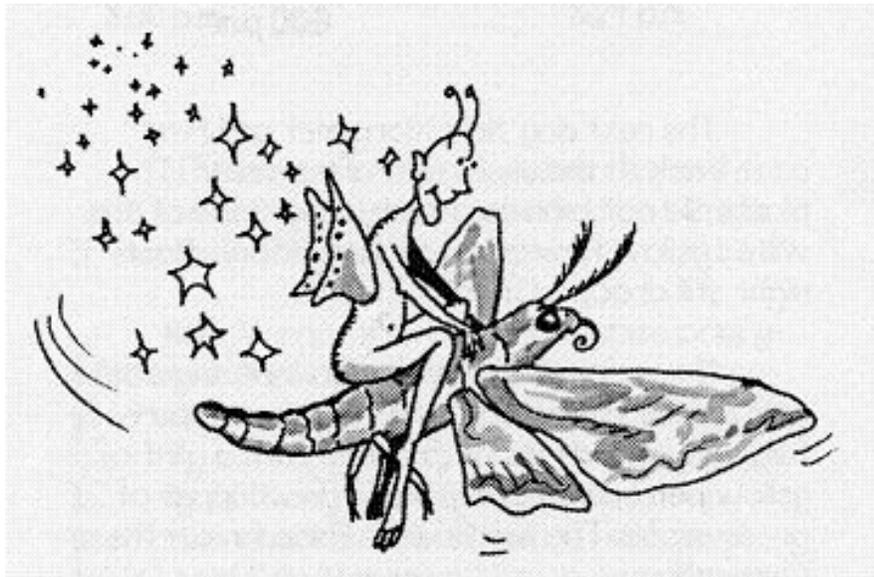
"It's like the Wicked Witch of the West," sighed Nelle Margaret. "The petals have melted into a puddle."

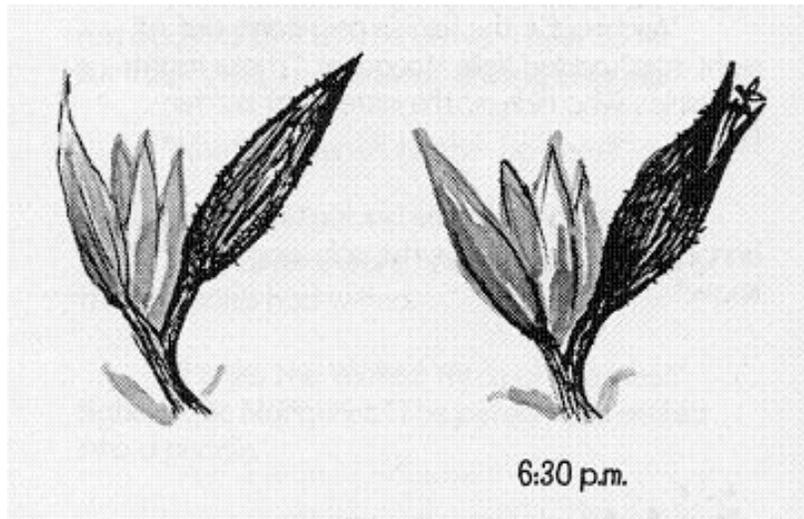
Evan was thinking. "Maybe the flowers only bloom at night, like the moonflowers my Aunt Georgia grows on her porch."



"And maybe the fairies only come out at night too," added Nelle Margaret. "These might be fairies who ride moths instead of butterflies."

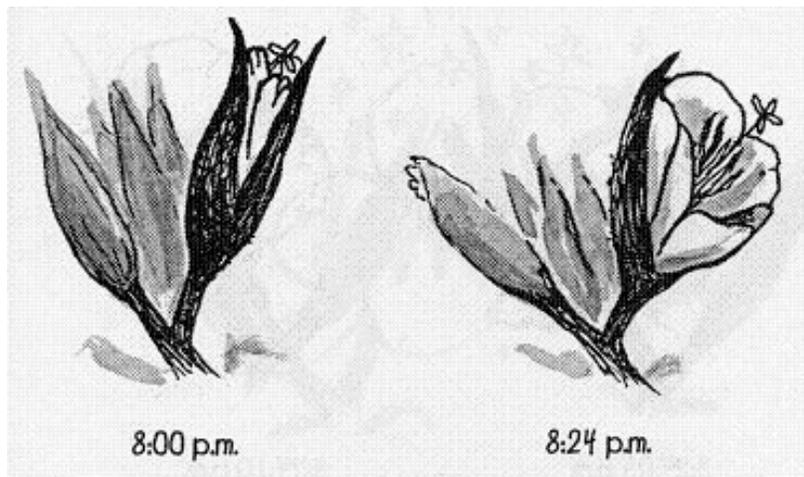
"We've got to come back at night again," announced Evan. "That's the only way we'll know."





The next day, Nelle Margaret and Evan came back to the shed right after dinner. The plants did not look very interesting. Some of the wilted yellow flowers which had bloomed last night still drooped from the stems.

"I see some buds with yellow poking out," said Nelle Margaret. As they looked more carefully, they found lots of fat buds with a glint of yellow petal pushing out from the wrapper of green sepals. The petals were folded inside like a Chinese fan.

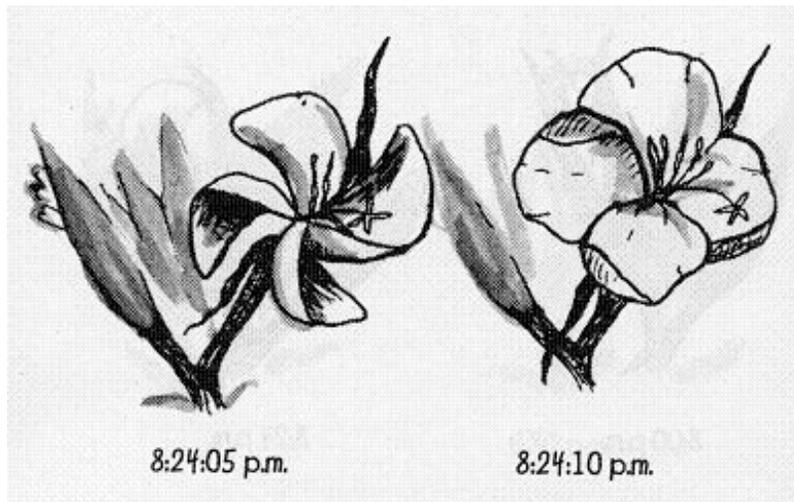


"These must be the blossoms that will open tonight," said Evan. He checked his watch. It was 6:30. They sat down to wait.

Nelle Margaret brought out some poppy seed cake. She had a feeling fairies liked poppy seed cake, especially with a little raspberry jam.

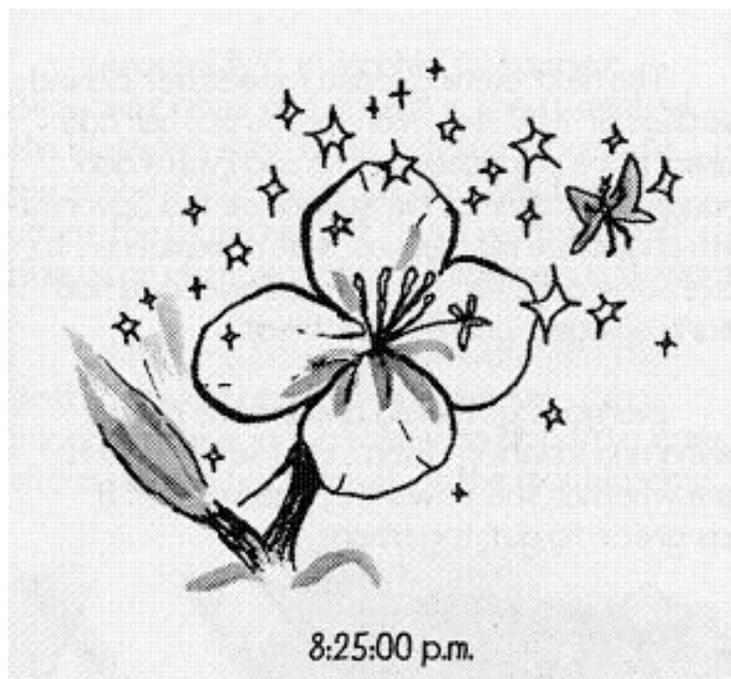
By 7:00, only a small piece of the poppy seed cake was left. "I'll put this on the fairies' table," said Nelle Margaret. "Just in case they stop there first."

"I'll keep watching," said Evan.



Nelle Margaret and Evan waited a long time. Nothing much seemed to happen. They had almost fallen asleep when Jasmine showed up. It was 8:00.

Now the flower buds were much fatter and more of the yellow petals were showing. The children stood up to look more closely. Fifteen, twenty minutes went by. All of a sudden, one blossom began to tremble. They stood with their noses practically touching the bud.



Nelle Margaret felt Jasmine rubbing her leg. She reached to pet her and just to her left was a glistening yellow flower, completely open. "Evan, look!" she cried.

And just then, yellow flowers began to pop open all over the plants. Evan checked his watch. It was 8:25.

The children didn't even hear Alison until she was right behind them. "You're late again!" she shouted. Nelle Margaret and Evan turned around. Alison's mouth was wide open. She had seen the flowers open too.

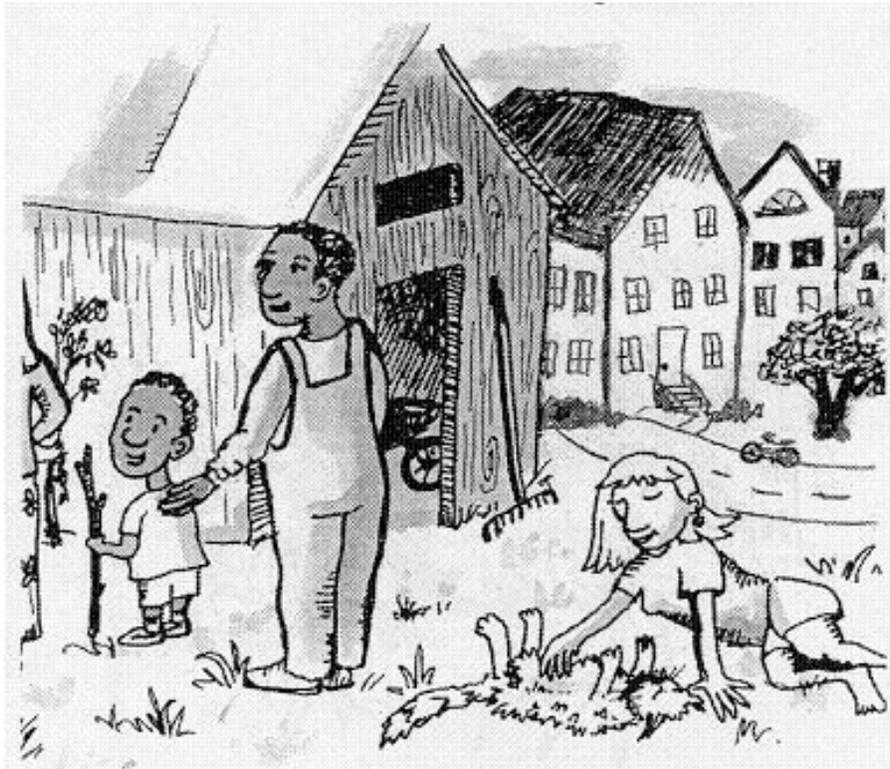
The next evening, both families met behind the shed at 8:05. Nelle Margaret's mother had baked more poppy seed cake and Evan's dad brought a pitcher of his special ice tea flavored with chocolate mint leaves. Nelle remembered to leave some cake for the fairies, somebody had clearly enjoyed yesterday's treat.

Everyone gathered around the plants, talking and laughing. Evan's dad said he didn't care whether the flowers opened or not. It was great to get together.



Around 8:20, it started to happen. Everyone oohed and aahed as they watched the blossoms flash open, sending a burst of lemon scent into the night air. They tried to count the blossoms but there were far too many. One plant alone had 88 shimmering flowers.

When the flower show was over, the moths showed up, right on schedule. Evan caught Jasmine just as she was about to leap into a plant in hot pursuit of the giant insects.



Both families came to watch the magic plants again the next evening. Before they went home, Nelle's mom had a great idea. Why not invite the whole neighborhood?

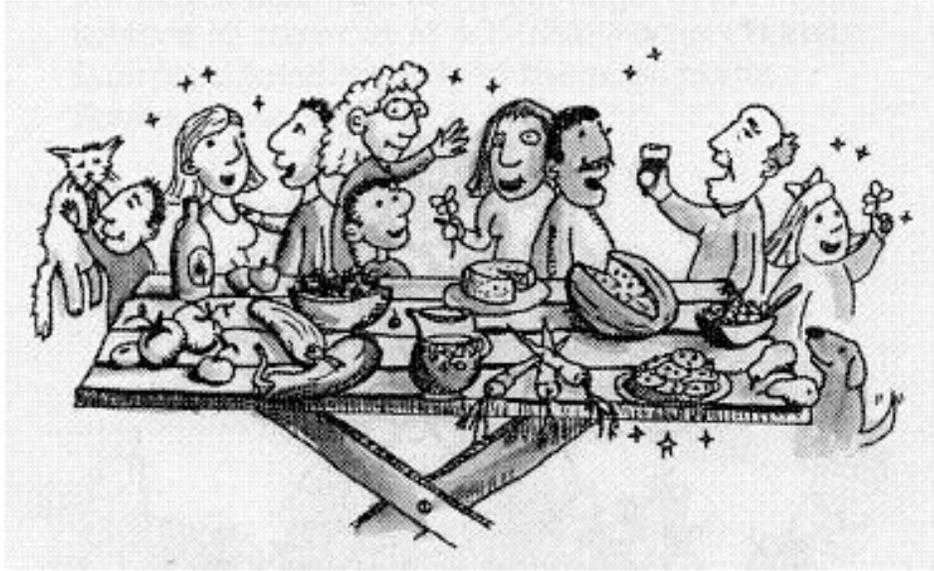
On the Fourth of July, everybody came for a potluck picnic in Nelle Margaret's back yard. Evan's grandmother Florence even got Mr. Buttons to come out. At 8:05. Nelle Margaret and Evan proudly led the way to the magic plants. Flower fireworks!



Miss Jean, who had travelled to many places, recognized the magic plants. "They are in the *Oenothera* [e-no-the'-ra] genus," she said. Many people call them evening primroses. I've checked all my references but I still can't find one that opens this dramatically." She pounded the stack of books under her arm and laughed. "I'll get to the bottom of this if it takes me all summer."



Folks continued to gather behind the old shed all through July and August. By the end of August, there weren't as many flowers opening each night but that hardly mattered.



Mr. Buttons contributed an old picnic table. Families shared their supper. Tomatoes and zucchini found good homes, carpools were formed, and both children and adults made new friends.



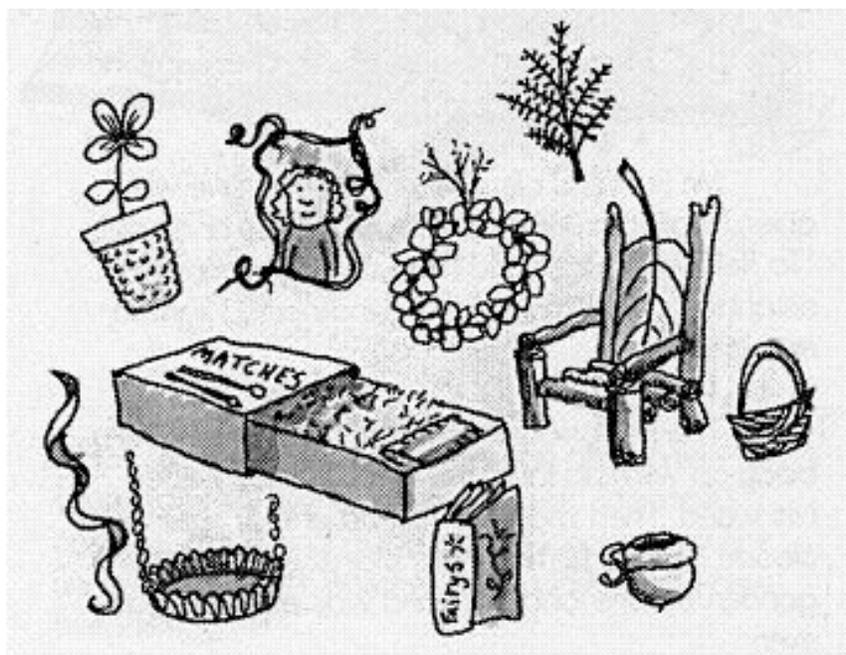
One evening, Mr. Buttons brought out some dandelion wine. He told the story of how he and his wife had discovered the magic plants during one of the many walks they enjoyed together. "Meg called it our light in the night," he said.

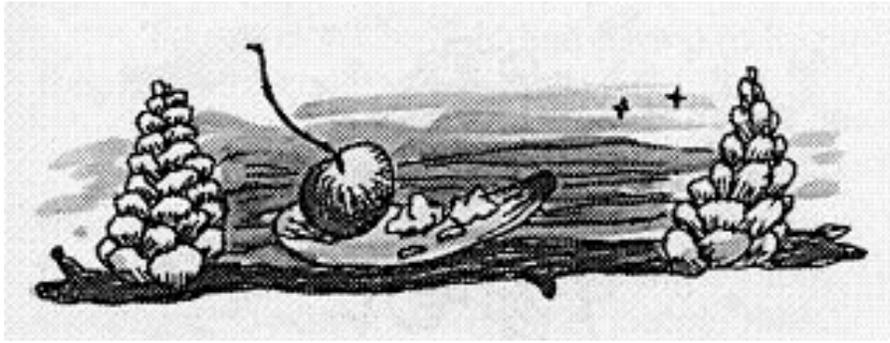
Mr. Buttons blew his nose. Everyone was quiet. Finally Mr. Buttons lifted his glass and said, "To Nelle Margaret and Evan and my wonderful neighbors. Thank you for rekindling the light in my night."

The next morning, Mr. Buttons woke everybody up with his lawn mower. Florence helped him weed. Then they planted dozens of volunteer cleome seedlings from Nelle Margaret's mother's garden. Before long, his yard was as pretty as ever.



Nelle Margaret and Evan worked on their fairy house all summer. It was one of those projects that didn't need an ending. It kept on growing as new ideas came to them. They made tiny books for the library, matchbox beds for pet mice and added moss to the roof. Jasper had taken to sleeping on the welcome mat, especially when the entrance was strewn with rose petals.





Nelle Margaret left the fairies a treat almost every day and it was usually gone the next morning. However, she still hadn't seen a fairy.

Evan spent many days making secret passages and underground tunnels. That way, he told Nelle Margaret, the fairies could escape as soon as footsteps approached, even if they forgot their disappearing dust.

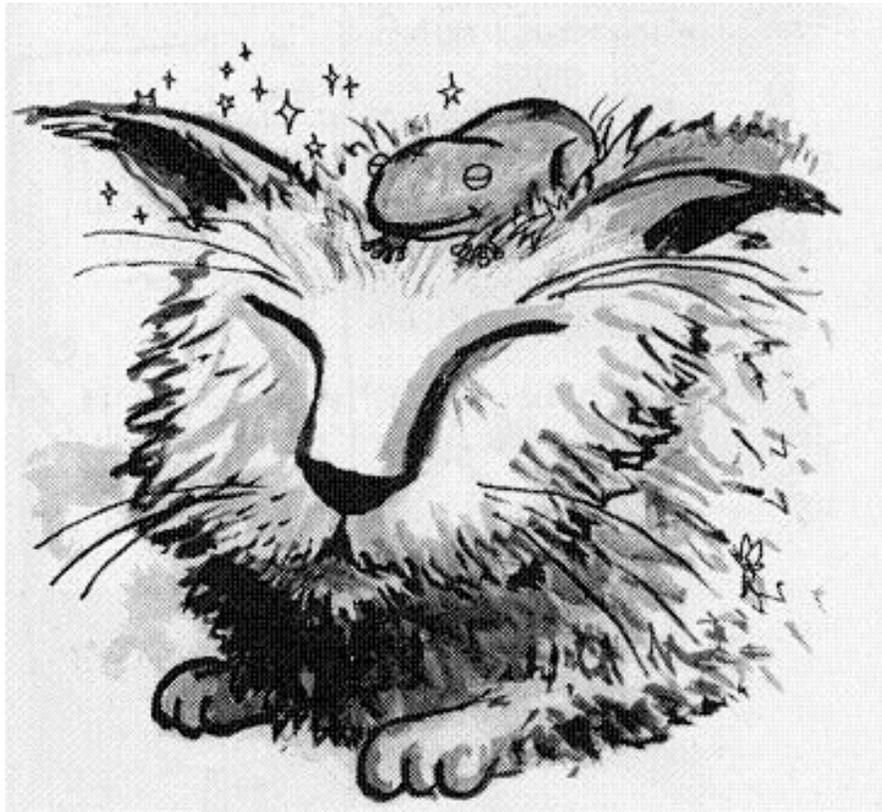


One day soon before school was to begin again, Nelle Margaret and Evan were playing cards with a tiny deck they had made for the fairies.

"I've been thinking," Nelle Margaret announced, "seeing doesn't always mean believing. That's because you can never see everything that is happening. When you're looking straight ahead, things are happening behind you. And there are worms in the earth right under my feet. Just because we can't see them doesn't mean they aren't there."

"So you don't have to see a fairy to know they are real?" questioned Evan.

"Fairies are real to me because it feels true in my heart," said Nelle Margaret. "Mom says that's how you know when something is really important, no matter what other people think."



They were quiet for a while.

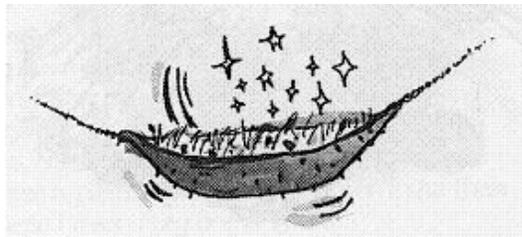
"Evan," said Nelle Margaret. "We'll always be friends."

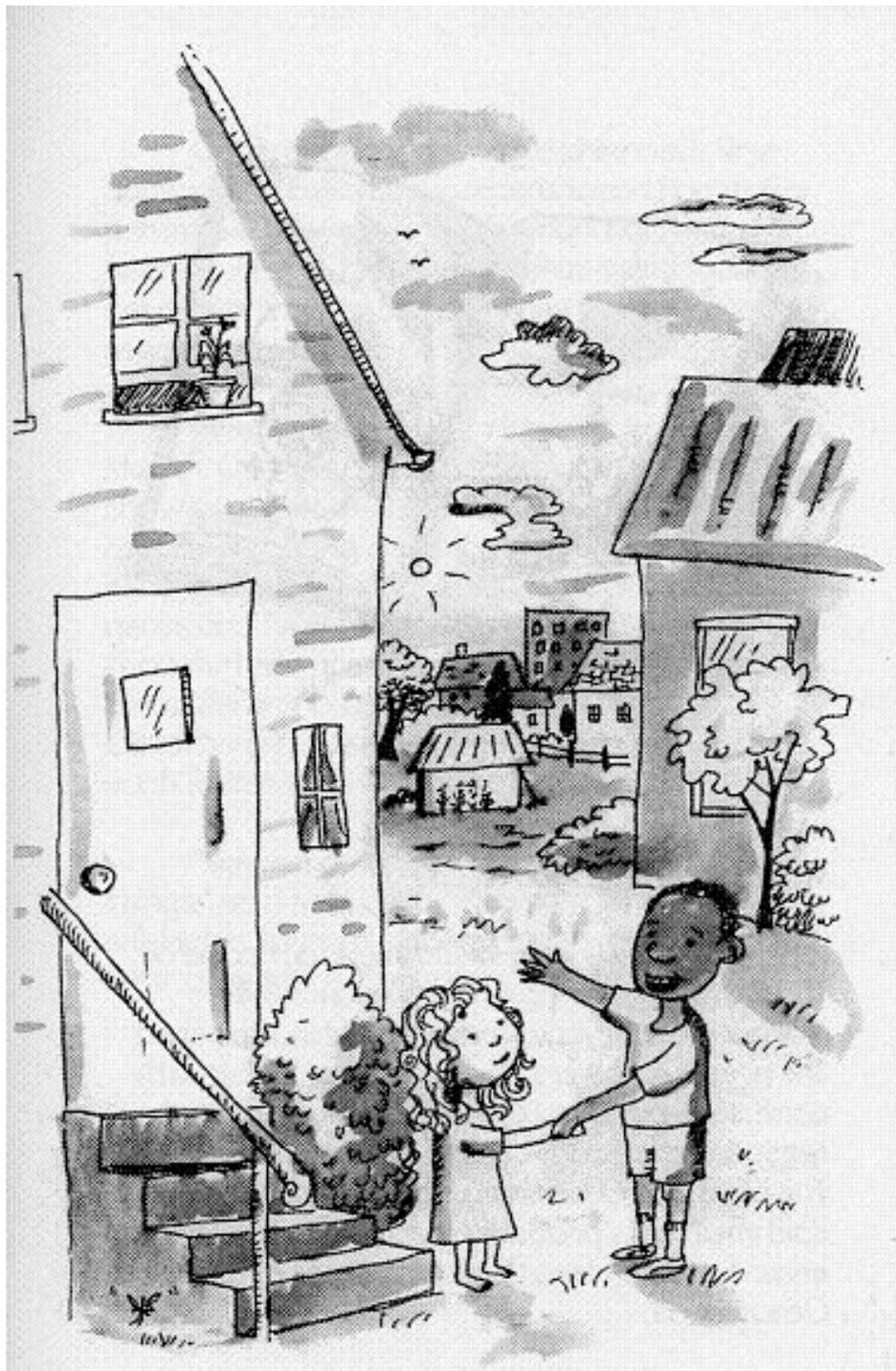
Evan scratched the ground with a stick. "How can you be so sure?" he finally asked.

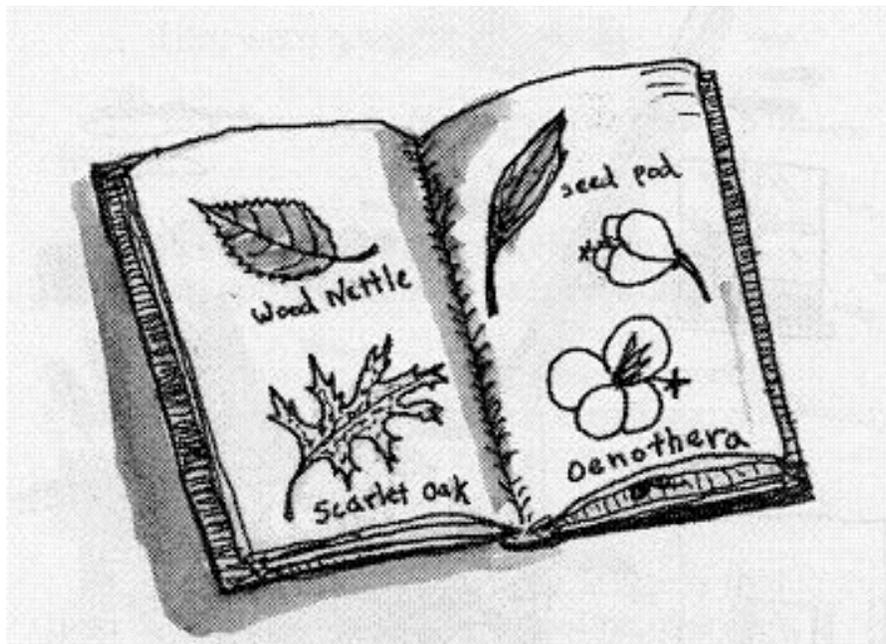
"That's easy," answered Nelle Margaret. "You don't make fun of my ideas even if you don't see things the same way. And because," she smiled, "it feels true in my heart."

Evan felt all of the lost puzzle pieces that had been rattling inside of him sail into the air. They landed with a whomp! and fit together as perfectly as the picture on the box. He couldn't see all of the picture just yet, but he was certain it would look just like him.

"Come on," he yelled, getting to his feet. "I'll race you to the magic flowers."







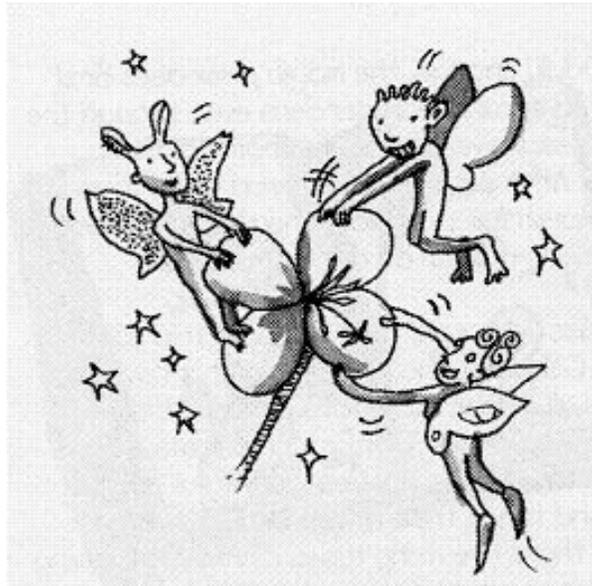
What Miss Jean Discovered

Miss Jean finally found the exact name of the Oenothera (e-no-the-ra) plants Nelle Margaret and Evan discovered behind the shed. She pressed flowers and sent these along with some seed pods to Dr. Warren L. Wagner at the Missouri Botanical Garden. Dr. Wagner identified the plants as *Oenothera glazioviana* 'Micheli.' He said the plants probably resulted from a chance cross between two common species of Oenotheras.

Oddly enough, the magic primroses first appeared in European gardens even though the parent seeds were brought from North America. At one time, *Oenotheras* were found only in North America. Now they have spread to nearly every corner of the world.

Miss Jean said that during a trip to Munich, Germany, she had seen a chart which showed all of the ancestors of *Oenothera glazioviana*. Using scientific instruments, botanists had been able to identify all of the genes and trace their origin. However, even though there are many types of night-blooming *Oenotheras*, no one can say exactly why *Oenothera glazioviana* opens its blooms so much faster than any of its cousins.

"Science can get to the bottom of many things," said Miss Jean. "However, whenever the subject is living things, there's always an element of mystery. Some people call it magic."



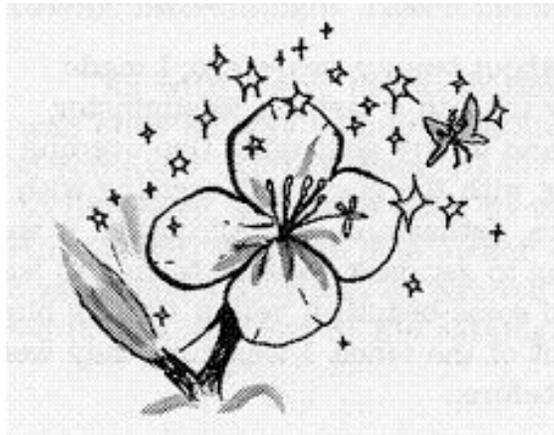
What's In A Name?

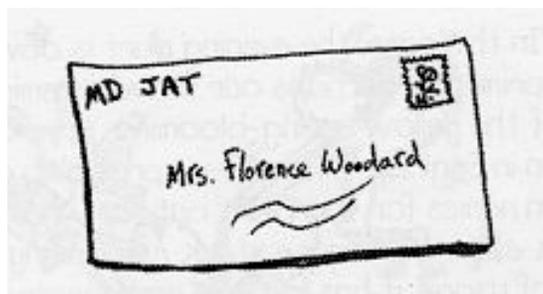
Miss Jean still had a lot of questions to answer. Everybody now knew that the Latin name for the magic plants was *Oenothera glazioviana*, *Oenothera glazioviana* 'Micheli' if you want to be formal. But what about the name evening primrose? How did that come about?

"Well," said Miss Jean. "Evening primrose is the common name, or popular name, for the plant. As our ancestors began to distinguish plants, they wanted to tell others about them. To talk, you need words, so they made up a name based on what a plant looked like or reminded them of."

"In this case, the evening part is obvious. As for primrose, perhaps our flowers reminded folks of the yellow spring-blooming primrose common in England. There were probably other common names for this plant but for whatever reason, evening primrose stuck. After many years of usage, it has become an accepted common name."

"By the way," cautioned Miss Jean, "primroses aren't closely related to *Oenotheras*. Their genus name is *Primula*. Although there's nothing wrong with common names, if you really want to be sure which plant you're discussing, scientific names are necessary. What we call evening primroses in Maryland might be known as moondrops in California. Once you know the scientific Latin name, you can talk about a plant with anyone in the world and know that you both mean the same thing."





Florence had something to add. She belonged to a group that swapped seeds through the mail. "These plants are called Tina James Magic Primrose in The Flower and Herb Exchange catalog. I wrote to Tina and asked her where she got the seeds. Here's what she wrote."

Dear Florence,

Thanks for your interest in the magic primroses. I am glad to share my part in the story.

About twenty years ago, I made weekly trips to a farm in Westminster, Maryland to buy goat milk. One evening I was playing with the goats and chatting with the farmers, Esther and Ray Arrington. It was starting to get dark. When I turned to leave, I noticed some beautiful yellow flowers blooming in front of the fence. I was sure they weren't there before.

As I looked more closely, I happened to catch a few last blossoms spinning open. Magic!

Esther and Ray didn't know where the plants came from. They had been here when they bought the farm some ten years ago. "Like money plants, these plants are biennials," Esther explained. "The first year, they make leaves and a strong root and the second year they make flowers. I'll dig you up a plant that will bloom next year."

This plant has been so much fun! Every year, I have a big party so folks can see the plants in bloom. My feeling is, a lot of people don't realize that plants are truly alive. When they see them physically move, it really opens the door to a new understanding. It won't be long before living things appear in a completely different light. That's the magic!

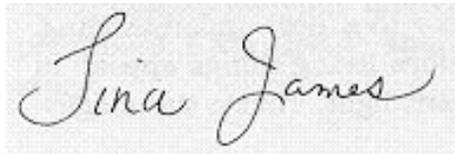
As with many heirloom flowers, there was once no way to buy seed since no seed company carried them. I sent seeds to Southern Exposure Seed Exchange in Virginia. The owner grew the flower himself and was so excited he featured it on the cover of his catalog.

He listed the seed as Tina James' Magic Primrose.

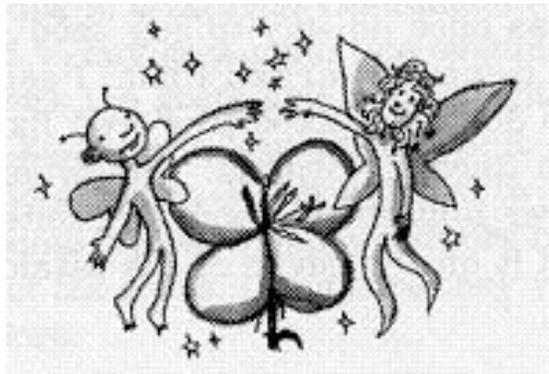
I've also been sharing seeds through seed swaps in garden magazines and through groups like The Flower and Herb Exchange. If everyone adopts a few of their favorite plants by saving the seeds, the world will always be full of beautiful flower memories.

As a bonus, I've corresponded with lots of wonderful gardeners through the mail. I've even had a chance to meet a few in person. If you're ever in Reisterstown, Maryland, come visit!

Happy flower trails,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tina James". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored, textured background.

Tina James



Lights in the Night

Most flowers open their blossoms to the sun and are pollinated by animals which are active in daylight hours, such as hummingbirds, butterflies, honeybees, flies — even humans with paintbrushes!

There are, however, plants that open their flowers in the evening. Most night-blooming plants are pollinated by moths. These plants have developed some incredible tricks to make it easier for moths to find them. For example, most night-blooming plants are very fragrant and so bright in color they nearly glow in the dark.

In the case of the magic primrose, the dramatic way in which the flowers spin open may be a special feature designed to catch the moths' attention. Another possibility is that the motion of the petals throws the scent into the air in such a way that the fragrance travels farther. What do you think?

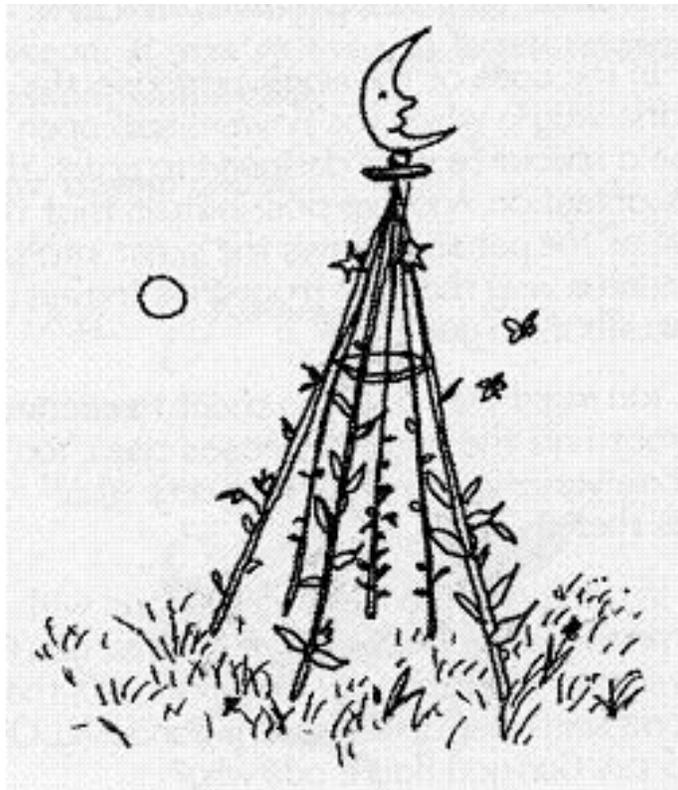
You might like to keep a chart to record the exact time the magic primroses open. You'll find some variations from day to day. What causes these?

In addition, when you correspond with magic primrose growers in other states, you'll discover more variations. In Baltimore, MD, the blossoms spin open at 8:25 p.m., in Sandusky, OH, at 9:15 p.m. Can you figure out why?

Make a Magic Moonlight Garden!

The 4-H Children's Garden at Michigan State University features a garden especially for night-blooming plants. Find a sunny place where it's easy to dig and you can make one too!

The first step is to build a tepee. Use 6 poles about 6 feet long. Tie the poles together at the top and place them in a 4-to-6 foot circle. Spread the poles a little bit apart where the doorway will be. Spread the other poles equally apart.



Plant magic primroses, *Oenothera glazioviana*, on either side of the doorway. In between the other poles, plant some flowering tobacco seeds. *Nicotiana alata* is a tall white-flowered variety that is wonderfully fragrant in the evening.

At the base of each pole, plant seeds of moonflower vines, *Ipomoea alba*. The large seeds will germinate faster if you soak them in warm water the night before planting.

Visit your Magic Moonlight Teepee in the evening with your flashlight. Can you identify the moths that land in the magic primroses? One type looks like a hummingbird, another like a fairy dragon!



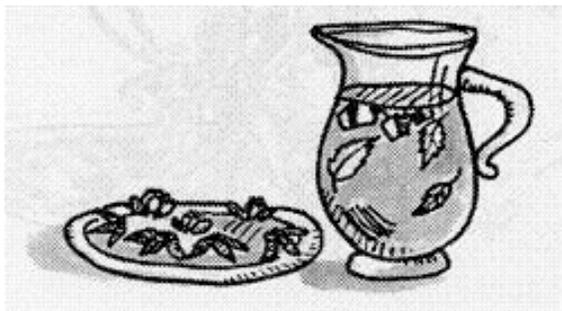
Magic Moonlight Party Recipe

Did you know that some flowers are edible? The magic primrose is one example. The beautiful yellow petals are quite tasty and have a pleasant crunch.

Here's an easy recipe using magic primrose petals which you can enjoy in your Magic Moonlight Teepee.

Mix one-third cup of peanut butter (or tahini, which is butter made from sesame seeds) with 1 tablespoon of honey. Using a teaspoon, carefully drop this sticky mixture onto individual petals. For more pizzazz, place a slice of banana cut in half on top and sprinkle with cinnamon.

You can use this same recipe to make appetizers from other edible flowers, such as violets, roses, tulips and nasturtiums. Remember! Not all flowers are edible. Check with mom or dad or another responsible adult first.



Save Magic Primrose Seeds

Every flowering plant makes seeds to reproduce itself. A seed is a carefully packaged baby plant with enough food for it to live until it can survive on its own.



It's important to save seeds from the special plants in your garden. That way, there will always be beautiful plants. You'll also have seeds to swap and share with other gardeners.

Producing seed is the last stage in a plant's life cycle. Look at the magic primrose in late August. You'll find brown seed pods on a long stalk where the flowers once were. When the stalks are dry, cut them off and place them in paper bags. Careful! Many seeds will shake out.

To separate the seeds from the pods, spread newspapers on a worktable. Use your fingers to work the seeds out of the pods. The seeds look like tiny black specks. Place the cleaned seeds in a paper envelope and label it. Also write the year the seed was harvested.

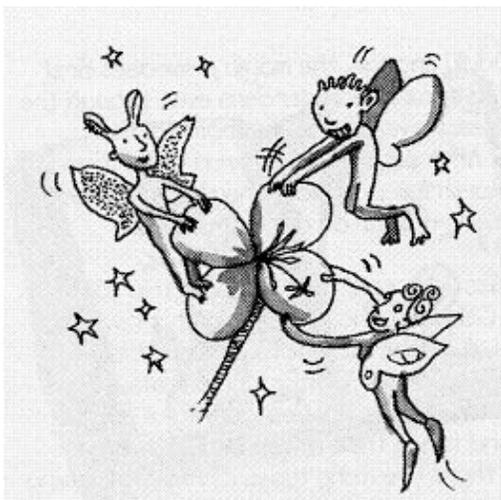
Stored in a cool dry place, magic primrose seeds will remain viable, which means they can sprout and grow, for at least 5 years.

Volunteers in the Garden

As biennial plants, magic primroses flower the year after you sow the seeds. A magnificent plant will bloom all summer, make thousands of seeds and then disappear. That's the life cycle of a biennial.

Even though the plant that bloomed this summer will not return next year, you'll often find many baby primroses where the mother plant grew.

Once the weather warms up the following spring, look carefully for seedlings that come up all by themselves. Transplant these "volunteers" to other places in the garden where they will have enough room to grow. You'll probably have plenty of extra seedlings to put in pots and give to your friends as well.



How to Start Seeds

When you share your seeds with other gardeners, tell them how to get the plants off to a good start. Here are instructions you can include with magic primrose seeds.

Oenothera glazioviana

Tina James' Magic Primrose

Sow seed spring to early summer in a sunny garden bed where there is some open space so you can spot the tiny seedlings when they sprout.

Sprinkle the seeds on the surface of the soil. Cover the seeds with a thin layer of soil. Press the soil over the seeds. Water gently. Keep the area moist until the seedlings pop up. This could take 3 to 21 days, faster when the weather is warm.

When the seedlings are 1-to-2 inches tall, dig them up carefully and plant where you want them to bloom next year. Be sure to put a label with each plant so they are not mistaken for weeds!

Size of plant: The first year a dandelion-looking rosette of leaves; the second year a 2-to-5 foot bushy plant!

Blooming period: mid June to August the year after sowing seed.

Join a Seed Swap

In addition to sharing magic primrose seeds and volunteers with friends and neighbors, it's fun to share seeds with gardeners who live in other areas.

The Seed Savers Exchange is a non-profit organization established to preserve our beautiful plants for all the generations to come. It's easy to join. Write to: Seed Savers Exchange, 3094 North Winn Road, Decorah, Iowa 52101, www.seedsavers.org.

Seed Sources for Magic Primroses

There are several small family-owned seed companies that sell *Oenothera glazioviana*, Tina James' magic primrose seeds. These folks are dedicated to preserving and enhancing our plant heritage. Their catalogs offer good information and endless possibilities for exploring heirloom plants.

Select Seeds

180 Stickney Hill Road
Union, CT 06076
www.SouthernExposure.com

Southern Exposure Seed Exchange

P.O.Box 460
Mineral, VA 23117
www.selectseeds.com

Visit Magical Public Gardens

Taking a trip? There are a number of fascinating public gardens with Tina James' magic primroses on display.

American Visionary Arts Museum
Baltimore Inner Harbor
800 Key Highway
Baltimore, MD 21230-3940
410-244-1900

4-H Children's Garden
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48823-5399
517-353-6692

United States Botanic Garden
245 First Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20024
202-225-8333

