

Interview Oct 4/03 p. D2

Bonnie Conley loves flowers and revels in their beauty. Her Yeomans Street property is dotted with literally thousands of flowers of varying colours, shapes and sizes.

"I love gardening. It's really a good hobby and gives me a lot of pleasure because I don't smoke or drink," Conley said. "It really is a labour of love."

The fruits of that labour regularly draws many admirers to her West Hill home, including the Belleville Garden Club that has presented her — yet again — with a Trillium Award for 2003.

She also shares her passion for flowers with Royalty.

Every Christmas for the past three decades, the 52-year-old Conley sends a bouquet of flowers to Queen Elizabeth II and her family. She orders the bouquet from a local florist — it's not from her own work.

"I do it because I respect the Royal Family," Conley said. "I like her to know that there are some Canadians that adore the Queen."

And every year, Conley receives a personal 'thank you' letter from the Queen's Lady-in-Waiting.

She treasures every royal reply, including the last one dated Dec. 30, 2002.

"The Queen wishes me to write and thank you and your family for your kind message and for the beautiful flowers. Her Majesty was delighted to receive them and was touched by your good wishes at Christmas. I am to thank you again for your thought for the Queen and for the Royal Family, which is much appreciated."

Conley said her country roots made her appreciate nature and got her involved on the the committee organizing the culinary exhibits at the annual Quinte Exhibition.

"I love nature and flowers are a very important part of my life. And I feel very grateful to the Lord above for giving me the strength to do these things that I do."

Born and raised in Glen Miller, Conley left Centennial Secondary School early to seek employment. She went to work on her grandfather's apple orchard and was a nanny for a couple from CFB Trenton. She did other babysitting jobs as well until she

married her husband, David, in 1971.

The couple moved into their Yeomans Street home near Lewis Street — where David grew up — and Conley stayed home to raise their daughter, Tanya.

"I babysat eight children here for at least

10 years...I was content to raise my daughter and babysit other children."

Nowadays, she only babysits her granddaughter, Hannah, who is almost two years old.

"She keeps me active and my mind going

all the time," Conley laughed.

Being a homemaker gives her plenty of time to look after all her flowers "and that is why I have developed such skill in beautifying my place with flowers," she said proudly.

Conley earned her first Trillium Award from the Belleville Garden Club in 1983 and, except for a couple of years, hasn't missed getting its top honour. The award recognizes "the highest achievement recognition of outstanding property beautification."

Conley said she is proud of every award. "But I really don't look for these awards. I look at gardening as therapy. Rather than taking pills, it's good for me to keep my limbs moving."

She does most of the work herself.

"David helps a little. He waters the flowers," she laughed.

Conley spares no expense when it comes to her gardening. She estimates it costs her \$1,200 a year for flowers "and it's worth every penny."

Her favourite time of the year is the end of July when the flowers are in full bloom.

"I get a lot of compliments. It just makes me feel that I have a purpose to do this and beautify a city street," said Conley.

Conley was a teenager when she started sending letters and get-well cards to prominent people. She sent one to Gene Autry who lost his ranch in a fire and got a reply, and his picture.

"I was thrilled. I thought this was the most wonderful thing that could happen."

For more than 30 years, Conley has been sending flowers — normally carnations with festive greenery — every Christmas to Queen Elizabeth II. She also sent a funeral arrangement when the Queen Mother died.

She has a scrapbook full of correspondence from Buckingham Palace.

Conley's kindness is felt by others as well.

"I always think of other people and how to make them happy...I'm a good listener."

Even animals benefit.

She donates food at Christmas and money throughout the year to the Quinte Humane Society "because I love animals and I want to help them out."