

GROWERTALKS

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Tarnished Icon

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Years ago, dining at a Greek restaurant with a group of cut flower growers, I foolishly broached the subject of Martha Stewart.

In hindsight, I'm glad it wasn't a steak house. A group of angry women with sharp knives is not, as Martha might note, a good thing. At the mere mention of the hated name, hackles rose, fangs gleamed, and an ugly spate of Martha-bashing began.

-- Martha's a, uh, rhymes with witch: Several growers and designers said they'd worked with her on book, magazine and TV projects, and found it NOT a pleasant experience.

-- Martha cheats: She pretends to invent, make or grow all this cool stuff herself, when everyone in the industry knows her teams of terrified minions do the real work.

-- Martha intimidates women: Unlike Martha, after working all day, chauffeuring the kids, paying the bills and keeping the house clean enough to stave off condemnation by the Board of Health, most wives and mothers just don't have the energy to print their own Christmas cards (or municipal bonds) on homemade paper with the juice of berries, gathered from the kitchen garden with a hand-woven willow basket and crushed in an adorable 18th-century mortar and pestle.

In short, Martha was held accountable for just about every not-good thing up to and possibly including the hole in the ozone layer. But one member of the group sat quietly waiting for a lull in the sniping. When the others paused to reload, she made a statement that silenced the room.

"I don't like her either," she said calmly. "But everyone at this table should sit down and write that woman a 'Thank You' note for what she's done for our industry."

Touché. No one could deny that Martha has raised the public's consciousness of the pleasures of doing and making, or that she exposed a vast audience to this group's products. For that matter, with her empire's emphasis on gardening and her branded plant line, it's not much of a stretch to say she's enlarged the audience for all the green industries, perennial growers included, despite the problems surrounding that plant line.

Martha's not-niceness is non-news now, but that long-ago dinner was my first clue that she is perhaps not always a sweetheart. She was still a new enough phenomenon that I was taken aback by the vehemently negative emotions her name evoked. And today, for many, the hackles are still raised, the fangs still gleam. Martha has achieved one-name celebrity, like Cher, or Sting. Or Osama.

The interesting and instructive part of Martha's Wall Street *faux pas* isn't that she may have done some illegal

insider trading and gotten caught with her hand in the spongeware cookie jar, but that so many people were so happy to see her stumble. The media sprang to arms as though the finances of the doyenne of domesticity were Watergate revisited.

Martha was grist for the gossip mills, fodder for late-night comics, fresh meat for lampooning cartoonists. We'll be amazed, the wags said, at how cheerful a drab gray prison cell can become with a little ingenuity and a splash of paint.

The gleeful ferocity of Martha's hounding speaks volumes--not about Martha but about us, about our instinctive vindictiveness toward the overdog, or, in this case, the *überhundin*.

This isn't, of course, a purely American trait, but a human one. We shake our heads in amusement at the pomp and circumstance surrounding the British royal family, but something in us longs for our own Royals. Lacking them, we raise up actors, athletes and politicians. But American heroes and heroines are like the milk bottles in an arcade booth: We set them up just for the pleasure of knocking them down.

The ironic thing about Martha making women feel inadequate is that Martha's whole schtick is to perpetuate and celebrate the traditions of home life as practiced by generations of homemakers. Unfortunately, her particular style is that of home life as practiced by some mythical superwoman--a hybrid of Ma Ingalls and Amy Vanderbilt, decorating the Little House in the Hamptons.

Martha will survive. We need her. She's the woman we love to hate, and there's no replacement on the horizon. I don't know if anyone at that table laid down their grudge and picked up a pen to thank Martha. But I'd bet against it. It would spoil too much of the fun.