





A PAINTER'S INSPIRATION

A secluded section of the Derkatchs' three-quarter acre property was designed as a memorial to Cecile's mother and is now a studio for teaching watercolour

Text and Photographs by MARILYNN MCARA

ARTISTS' RETREAT: Above, Watercolourist and gardener, Cecile Derkatch, at work in her garden studio. Left, Victorian statuary, curving paths, nooks and crannies, and a continuous sequence of blooms, provide ample subjects for artists.

THE AIR IS CRISP with impending autumn and the blue-sky day is only an hour old, as Cecile Derkatch makes her morning garden rounds. Out the patio door, past the waterfall and pond and second-flush blooms of the rose garden, down into the enclave of the lower garden: her special Victorian garden.

Pushing open the white wrought-iron gates, Cecile fondly glances at the bronze dedication plaque that proclaims this as “Mom’s Garden,” in memory of her mother, Dorilda Limoges. Whether gardening, painting, or relaxing in Mom’s Garden, always there are memories and the wish that her

mother was still alive to enjoy the floral retreat Cecile has created from the former vegetable garden.

Protected by trees and hedge, cherubs and the Victorian lady fountain in the centre, Mom’s Garden is a peaceful, restful place that beckons with flowing design, pastel blooms, and the gentle sounds of birdsong, bees and classical music.

Following the curved paths between raised beds, Cecile checks to see what has grown or opened up, noting any plants that need assistance, and anything she might want to paint. She’s been keeping an eye on the oriental lily that has made a late-in-the-season surprise appearance; now, its second blossom is unfolding, and its

Avon-scent calls, “Notice me!”

Lilies are among her favourite flowers, and Cecile wants to paint this one, the last of summer. Maybe today. There’s no rain forecast, there’s virtually no wind, and Mom’s Garden will be in shade for at least another hour: a perfect morning to paint. Gathering her coffee cup, watercolour supplies, canvas, easel, stool, and portable umbrella for late-morning shade, she sets up and begins to paint.

“I have always loved flowers,” says Cecile, recalling how she used to doodle flowers and people during long phone conversations as a teen. “My mother loved flowers too. My earliest memories are of her walking around and admiring her flowers, deadheading





VICTORIAN CHARM: Preceding Page, Asiatic lilies, astilbe, hosta, cosmos and purple coneflower weave a tapestry of colour at midsummer. Left: White statuary adds to the unique personality of Mom's Garden. Right, Resting spot at the end of a winding path.

and weeding. “We lived in a suburb of Bonnyville, and we had a humungous, lush garden with vegetables and loads of flowers,” she recalls. “There were 12 of us kids (I was the youngest), and we did a lot of weed-picking. The garden was so big that we used it to play hide-and-go-seek among the corn and pea patches; we also tried to get lost in it to get out of a chore.”

When she was 17, Cecile visited the Butchart Gardens with her parents. “My mother and I fell in love with the place, and made my dad take us back two more days,” she says. “I remember thinking I’d like to have my own flower garden.”

In 1973, when Cecile and her husband, Wally, built on the three-quarter acre property they bought in Sherwood Park, there was lots of room left for kids, entertaining and a garden. The lowest, farthest part of the backyard became the vegetable garden.

Eventually, as their three children grew up, Cecile lost interest in vegetable gardening and the couple decided to convert it to flowers. “I wanted to create a flower garden that would provide reference material for my art and be a living space—an extension of our home,” explains Cecile. “We decided to dedicate it to my mother, because

she’d always loved flowers and gardening.”

Cecile spent much of that winter reading hundreds of gardening books and planning the design for Mom’s Garden. What evolved was a plan for a secluded space with curved beds and paths, and white Victorian statuary and furniture as accents. “I kept in mind that I would be painting, so I



planned for interesting nooks and crannies, different viewpoints, paths wide enough for an easel, and a protected painting area under a pruned overhanging tree,” says Cecile.

“The plants took a long time to plan because I had both horticultural and artistic considerations. I wanted to use the principles of art in the garden: horizontal and vertical lines; different forms, heights, textures, and colours in both foliage and flowers; and an overall harmony.” For continuous colour, Cecile planned to combine annuals

and perennials, with “a series of perennials that take over, one after another so there’s always a show—tulips, irises, peonies, roses, lilies and dahlias.”

With Cecile’s sketches and concepts in mind, and assisted by their youngest son David and son-in-law Gio, Wally undertook the construction during the spring and summer of 1992. The couple ordered about 45,000 pounds of Allan Block and gravel—“which was just a guess,” says Cecile. “It was dumped on the front driveway, and had to be hauled to the far corner of the backyard, because there’s no alley.” It was an enormous undertaking, “but we were green, and didn’t think about biting off more than you can chew,” says Cecile.

First, Wally dug the dirt out to accommodate wiring, drainage, and a different sprinkler system. Using Allan Blocks (each weighing about 60 pounds), the three men created raised beds one by one, beginning at the back. First, they laid a single tier, to establish the correct curve—a difficult task, often requiring adjustments under Cecile’s direction. Then they removed them, dug down eight inches to clay, replaced the blocks and added a second tier, and filled the bed with their



PINK SPLENDOUR: Above, Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) indigenous to the prairies, has long been used by herbalists to increase the body's resistance to infection. Right, Poppy (*Papaver orientale*) backed by the fluffy plumes of astilbe.

own compost and dirt removed from the walkways.

The Victorian fountain, which would become the focal point in the centre of the garden, needed two eight foot concrete pilings, a concrete base and cinder blocks encircled with three tiers of Allan Block. More work followed: drainage pipe and low voltage wiring, a different sprinkler system, walkways of stone and pea gravel, an arbor. "It was lots of hard work," says Wally, glad he was a bit younger when he did it.

THAT AUTUMN, THE CONSTRUCTION complete, Cecile planted bulbs, irises and peonies. The following spring, 1993, she did the rest of the planting and that summer they celebrated the garden's dedication

with a big pig roast and party. She recalls, "our family went into Mom's Garden and had a good cry."

Mom's Garden now includes over 6,000 perennials— among them Asiatic lilies, Nepeta (catmint), astilbe, cosmos, Echinacea, baby's breath, sage, sedum, thyme, lamium, hosta, rose, lavender, datura, begonia, monarda, masterwort and phlox. Mom's Garden is always evolving for both horticultural and artistic reasons. "I'll change plants if the colour combination doesn't work, and to allow for interesting shadow patterns," says Cecile. Constant deadheading, though a lot of work, "makes the flowers bloom and bloom"—as important for painting as pleasure. Cecile teaches watercolours and often has outdoor classes in her garden. Students are welcome to roam the whole property and paint whatever

attracts them, including the formal courtyard, statuary, the ponds, and the rose garden. But Mom's Garden is so full of compelling subjects that as many as 20 students have worked in it at one time.

"More and more, I find myself combining my artwork with gardening; I'm enjoying them both equally," observes Cecile. "I don't know if my gardening enhances the painting, or if my painting enhances my gardening, but it's working and I love it." ■

Marilynn McAra is an Edmonton-based freelance writer/photographer specializing in features about gardens, homes and people. Her publication credits include *Canadian Gardening*, *Garden Gate*, *Globe and Mail*, *Edmonton Journal* and *Photo Life*. Her photos have also appeared in corporate brochures, textbooks, government publications and on a bank credit card.

