



GARDEN



THROUGH A GARDENER'S LENS

MARILYNN MCARA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROSEMARIE STEPANKO

With a gardener's uncanny ability to spot voracious insects at 20 paces, Rosemarie Stepanko first notices the spider while pruning nearby. Big and black, quietly assuming camouflage amid pink petals of a rose, the spider waits to catch its satisfaction of nectar-feeding insects. Fascinated, Rosemarie steps closer but the spider, seeing movement, burrows deeper into the petals. She promptly fetches her tripod, camera, and reflector and photographs the reluctant subject.

This close-up appreciation of her private insect-world is a recent discovery for Rosemarie, whose Edmonton garden nurtures her twin passions of photography and gardening. "When you put a macro (close-up) lens on, bugs don't look like hostile beasts; they're beautiful," she says, "though I doubt I'll extend that to slugs!" She says photography and the magnification of a macro lens make you look at your garden in a different light; you notice and gain an appreciation for life. "Both gardening and photography can be art forms," says Rosemarie. "You're always looking and using all your senses, and each helps you with the other."

Both hobbies are creative and relaxing diversions from Rosemarie's occupation of family physician. Photography—specifically nature photography during hiking trips to Elk Island National Park and the mountains—came first; so when she began to garden, Rosemarie used her camera to document her garden's progress



and plant combinations she liked. “I began gardening when the kids were young, because it was a hobby that didn’t take me away from home,” she recalls. “It was also a way to beautify my surroundings. You decorate the inside of your home; why not the outside too?”

In 1993, Rosemarie and her husband, Barry Lastiwka, moved into their current home, a 70-year-old clinker brick house they’d found in the Glenora district. The yard backed onto a ravine and had the mature trees and good gardening potential they’d looked for; it was, in fact, untouched and “looked like a campsite.” The couple began a three-year renovation of the whole yard, keeping only the trees, a huge mountain ash in front, eastern cedar on the south side, and weeping willow in back. After consideration of light and drainage factors, Barry put his expertise as a horticulturalist and owner of Lacombe Landscaping to work and created a plan. Then he built the curved cob-

blestone walks, patio, fences, and arbours, and installed a watering system, lighting, window boxes, and a hot tub.



Once the “bones” were in place, the couple planted...with ongoing experimentation to see what would work well in this yard with little light. Because the house is set back on the property, with a small back yard, most of the perennial borders are in the front—at last count, about 550 perennials and 40 shrubs. “We over-planted because we wanted a

‘cottage’ look to complement the house, and we wanted it flush quickly,” explains Rosemarie. “Fortunately, in terms of cost, Barry is in the landscape business.”

The front garden gets the most light and was planned for a succession of bloom. In May, waves of white anemones nod peacefully, encircling a bird bath, curved stone bench, and spring-green oasis of lawn. In June, the border in front of the wrought-iron fence bubbles with the pinks and whites of tulips, phlox and cerastium. In July, the sunniest part of the yard bursts into the rich

blues and yellows of delphiniums and *nepeta siberica*, heliopsis and Asiatic lilies, with pink roses for accents.

Vine-covered twin arbours span the distance between the house and property sides, their arched entrances defining the side gardens, each with its own bench and view. The main

pathway is lined on the shady side with ferns, Siberian iris, wood violet, *digitalis grandiflora*, and astilbe; on the brighter side with purple/yellow combinations of bearded iris, salvia, and delphiniums mixed with ligularia, 'Foxy' digitalis, and heliopsis. The cobblestone path is extra-wide, with a welcome feel and room for plants to spill onto it—East Friesland *salvia nemorosa* and *campanula rotundifolia*, which Rosemarie likes because they're dainty and bloom all summer. A proliferation of delicate white wood violets (*viola canadensis*), bloom during May and June, adding to the carefree, somewhat wild look of the side borders. Rosemarie assists their inclination to naturalize by scattering their seeds farther along the path.



The brick patio at the end of the path features a Japanese-style gazebo-enclosed hot tub, brick barbecue/potting area, and table with big willow chairs—all under the canopy of the mature weeping willow. This pleasant shady retreat, which is right out the back door, is an extension of the family's living area. "We prefer this to a deck, which is usually high so you're looking at neighbours," says Rosemarie. "We like to be down at plant level, surrounded by the garden. In early morning or late evening, we like to soak in the hot tub. There's a lovely view of the garden in each direction, and the lighting makes it pretty at night."



Rosemarie uses repetition of colours and plants to achieve unity throughout her garden. The yellows/whites/pinks/blues of front and side are carried through to the back, where bold splashes of annuals in containers brighten the cool greens of shade-loving plants. The window boxes—their ivy geranium/lobelia cascades evoking memories of travels in France—enhance the back of the



house and continue along the side of the garage. And some of the plants which said “hello” at the front gate are repeated later along the path. Other design features include seating in secluded areas, and small surprises tucked among plants...a wind vane, ceramic garden goddess, west coast Indian mask, wall fountain, shell-shaped bird feeder, and patterned stepping stones. Rosemarie also plans for scent in the garden. In addition to growing perfumed plants such as roses, she puts oriental lilies into pots and moves them where their welcoming scent will be noticed—at front gate and back door, for example.

In addition to roses and oriental lilies, Rosemarie’s favourite plants include *nepeta siberica*, “because it is very care-free, hardy, and has a beautiful feathery/lacy look.” But her “favourite favourite” is flax (*linum perenne*), “because it blooms a long time and self-seeds, gives an airy/lacy look, and

combines with other plants beautifully. Everybody should have flax somewhere.”



Gardening is immensely satisfying to Rosemarie. “It combines physical labour with intellectual challenge, mental relaxation, and aesthetics,” she says. “I like to be surrounded by things that please me visually.” Now that her garden is more developed and gardening duties less time-consuming, Rosemarie has more time for photography: “I can whip out my camera if I see a dragonfly on a plant while I’m gardening.” Her photographic explorations of the

lush landscape within her own garden walls have now expanded beyond documentation of the garden and plant combinations, to include close-ups of insects, backlit petals, time-lapse shots of unfolding buds, and single petals or blooms in a sea of soft-focus.

“I’m having more fun with my camera,” says Rosemarie, adding, “You don’t have to go hiking in the mountains to photograph nature; you can have great fun just photographing in your own yard. That’s been a revelation to me:

that I can combine both gardening and photography.”

Rosemarie Stepanko’s home and garden were part of the Alberta Ballet House and Garden Tour last year. This year’s Alberta Ballet Tour will take place in both Calgary and Edmonton on the weekend of June 26 and 27, 1999.

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