

BOREAL BEAUTY



MARIANNE BRUCE

by Marianne Bruce

What comes to mind when you hear the name “Fort McMurray”? Oil sands, heavy industry, megaprojects, money and jobs? Maybe Far North, isolated or in the bush and muskeg? If you are a gardener, you may already know that this city is officially boreal forest subarctic and either Zone 0 or Zone 1 depending on who publishes the climate zone map you are looking at, with a total of 90 to 95 frost-free days. Positively off-putting for some people who can’t imagine even beginning to garden in that length of time.

Well, here’s the good news.

Fort McMurray is at the same latitude as Prince Rupert, Edinburgh, most of Denmark, and both Northern Ireland and County Donegal. Those places aren’t so grim, garden-wise. At this latitude, compensation for the short growing season is more daylight hours in the summer.

The older part of Fort McMurray is situated in a river valley, built at the site of the merging of the Athabasca

and the Clearwater rivers and a couple of smaller tributaries. For gardening, this location has two

advantages. The valley provides shelter from the full force of adverse weather. And the rivers have in the past left rich soils deposited along their banks. Just ask the market gardeners who run thriving operations there. Newer areas of the city are located out of the valley, and so enjoy different gardening conditions. Whether in or out of this valley, Fort McMurray is comprised of a series of microclimate areas, some as small as a city block or less; as a result, one yard receives less frost or later frost than “everyone else.”

The most practical plant choices for the city are hardy varieties developed in Russia, Siberia, or the northern Canada agricultural experimental stations. But adventurous gardeners buy one or two “query” plants just to try them out. A number of plants thrive here which “shouldn’t” be growing anywhere near Fort McMurray, but apparently no one ever shared that information with the plants.



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ABOVE: Community gardener Jim Walbridge showing off part of his harvest.
 TOP RIGHT: Helen Pacholko with sign renaming an Adopt-a-Park after her.
 BOTTOM RIGHT: Dianthus is one of the hardy species that thrive here.

In addition to lovely private gardens, community gardening projects and developments can be found throughout the city. The Woodland Garden Society, a registered horticultural society since 1985, organizes plant swaps and sales; hosts seminars and workshops—sometimes with out-of-town speakers such as garden legend Lois Hole and TV gardening personality David Tarrant; and offers non-credit gardening and landscaping courses and seminars (taught by Society members) through Keyano College, the local community college. Most recently, the Society is establishing a demonstration garden that will display the range of possible plant choices for this climate and area.

Fort McMurray’s citizens also enjoy the benefits of a number of public park areas in its Borealis Parks system, including Adopt-a-Park areas. That program began here in 1989 and currently 27 areas ranging in size from a traffic island to a 10-acre neighbourhood site are registered with the city. Citizens who wish to add such an area to their neighbourhood receive guidelines and “starter” trees from the city.

A series of educational seminars is offered by municipal parks staff as well. The larger of such areas are identified by an Adopt-a-Park sign provided by the city. Generally, these “adopted” parks become reasonably self-sustaining. People who live nearby assume responsibility for the park in all its aspects—weeding, planting, watering, fertilizing, mowing, composting, whatever the park needs to look its best—and in return they gain all of the tangible and intangible benefits gardening



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can provide. Apartment dwellers especially can benefit from this program.

The largest Adopt-a-Park, the 10-acre site, has recently been renamed the Helen Pacholko Park to recognize this local gardener's multi-year efforts toward the establishment of this and other such areas throughout Fort McMurray. In addition to working in her own large garden, Pacholko is found caring for this park almost daily. As it is home to living things, this park evolves. New plants and features are added. Some years there is a demonstration area to test how selected plants grow in Fort McMurray's conditions. Recently this took the form of planting small amounts of grains—wheat, buckwheat, oats, barley, and the like—which did very well here.

Benches, picnic tables, garbage cans, containers for recycling drink cans and for plastic bags for “doggie pickups,” bird baths and feeders have all been added to this park. The city donates some items outright; funding for others comes from a portion of fees charged for composting seminars and cash donations. Pacholko coordinates the exchange of plants and seeds—large numbers of which she provides from her own gardening efforts—as well as taking in plant pots and trays for re-use.

This park also includes a demonstration compost garden, where different kinds of bins and containers are in use to “change” leaves, grass, cuttings and other garden waste products into soil-enriching compost. Gardeners can add their compost-suitable materials to the site and take away both “finished” compost and ideas for use in their own gardens. Nearby, a rock garden (named “Mr. Rabbit’s Garden”) is being

ABOVE: A view of Pacholko Park, with mixed plantings of flowers and shrubs in the foreground.



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ABOVE: A community garden plot and its eager crew.

TOP RIGHT: Dahlias in Pacholko Park.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Official opening of the Demonstration Compost Garden in 1993.

built, complete with a stepping-stone pathway.

A recent development in Helen Pacholko Park is the community garden. Created with an initial 40 cubic yards of soil supplied by the city, the garden soil is continuously improved by adding the fresh compost made elsewhere in the park and semi-annual donations of manure from local riding stables. So far, there is no on-site source of water, so gardeners have to bring along their own for their plots. No rent is charged to use a plot in this garden. Instead, community gardeners are asked to help with area clean-up, weeding or keeping up a flower bed. At least 20 plots have been given out to gardeners from diverse cultural backgrounds. The plots regularly yield a wide variety of crops produced through a range of gardening styles. In addition to edible and other benefits, gardeners swap plants, seeds, ideas, techniques, recipes—and learn from each other. Not just food but friendships grow.

In 1991, Helen Pacholko began to offer multi-media seminars on composting based on the Ontario Council on Composting's home composting education program. Now, these seminars are offered every year during Environment Week each June. They attract about 50 participants, some of whom are "repeaters" who want to refresh their memories or to see what may be new in the way of equipment or techniques. Pacholko also conducts workshops year-round in the schools about worm composting and how to set up one's own colony of odour-free, hungry little "processors" that take kitchen waste, digest it, and give you back "black gold" for your garden.



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Currently, Evergreen Canada and Suncor's Energy Foundation are working together on a major development to enhance Fort McMurray's urban green space. Evergreen Canada, a registered national charity founded in 1991, focuses on the development of community naturalization projects in three areas: school grounds, public lands and residential land. Such projects stress the use of native vegetation and natural landscape design. In this association with Suncor, Evergreen will be supporting urban greening projects in communities where Suncor operates: Fort McMurray and Calgary in Alberta, Sarnia in Ontario. In Fort McMurray, a short list of five possible projects was compiled, with Suncor employees voting to make the final selection. The project chosen is an extension of the existing Birchwood Trail system, and will include natural feature information signs, bird-watching blinds, and benches. Groundbreaking is scheduled for spring 2001.

Fort McMurray was named "The best place to live for nature lovers" by Canadian Living magazine in 1997. Perhaps next time you hear the name "Fort McMurray," you'll have a different picture in mind. 🐾

ABOVE: A hardy Russian-species sunflower is visited by a butterfly.

Marianne Bruce, trained as a librarian, now runs her own business, Raven Information Services. She and husband Graham have lived in the same house in Fort McMurray since they married (17 years); they do putter in their garden.