



## Erna's Garden

By David McNeill  
Photography by Gordon Petersen

Tucked away in the southwest corner of Alberta, in an old hamlet, is a garden, cheery and confident, with roots in the history of the province's early mining ventures and trailing even further back to the mountains of Austria. Tracing out the property lines which surround the garden are tightly packed spruce, balsam fir, elder, laurel willow and caragana. Branches of one rest on others, firmly braced against the sometimes blasting southwesterly chinooks.

A passerby might wonder whether the place is abandoned, so tightly woven, so unkempt, are these guards at the property front. Inside, however, one enters a haven—green, cool and calm, removed from the wilting heat of a summer day or the business of the wind. Neither designed by landscape architects nor grown for the public, it is crafted by the hands of an enterprising and sunny octogenarian who, like her parents, has seen her way through very tough times, yet kept her sense of optimism and enthusiasm.

Informal and inviting, this garden delights the eye with the liveliness of its flowers circling the lawn around a cabin.

And whets the curiosity with trees and shrubs usually associated with more temperate climates.

One summer evening in 1949, gardener Erna Kelly remembers, she and her brother, who ranched up the valley, began to clear the lot of shrubs and trees, turning the sod by hand and by tractor, finishing a day of work under moonlight.

Her two younger brothers had just married and left their mother, Louise, now alone, on the family farm overlooking Screwdriver Creek. So Louise decided it was time to retire to the 150-foot-square lot in the almost ghost hamlet of nearby Beaver Mines.

In time, in the middle of the lot, they built a simple four-room cabin, with no indoor plumbing, its only heat from a wood and coal stove. And outside, repelling the grass that was trying to reclaim its territory, a new vegetable and herb garden.

Louise had emigrated from Austria to the Crownsnest Pass in 1912, following her husband, who had preceded her two years earlier, and toting a baby girl and boy. She disembarked the train along with her brother, who became so discouraged

ABOVE: Erna Kelly has gardened in southwest Alberta all her life. RIGHT: Yellow calendula, Shirley poppies and lupine carpet Erna's old garden. As her mother had done in 1949, Erna moved into the simple cottage in 1974, then sold the lot three years ago and moved next door.





by the sight of the shack-and-tent town that he turned around and went back home. (A few years later, he wrote that he had made a mistake.)

Erna's father had "followed the mines" in Europe, she explains. Followed them from region to region until there was no work, then was drawn to western Canada, to the Leitch Collieries outside of Frank, by enticements of mining companies he had worked for in Europe with operations in the Crowsnest Pass.

Within a year of her arrival, Louise bore Erna, then two more children. To supplement her husband's wages, she put in a large vegetable garden, taking up the whole yard of the family's very modest miner's lot in Bellevue.

In 1919, before Erna was old enough for school, her father died, possibly, says Erna, from complications due to the mining life. The family was on the verge of destitution. The death occurred in the spring and it wasn't until the fall that the province finally began its \$10 per child per month allowance.

The mines were starting to play out. Neighbours and friends were barely able to keep themselves going; the men looked for extra wages during the fall harvests in nearby Pincher Creek. So Louise had to provide for the family on her own, and the garden took on a desperate importance.

Having grown up in a small village with a garden and a few chickens, she was a wonderful gardener, according to Erna. She would have loved to plant flowers, but every foot was needed for vegetables. Every child, when big enough, was pressed into tending it and processing the produce. "It was survival, actually," remarks Erna.

To supplement the family income, Erna, at the age of nine, was out scrubbing floors of better-to-do English families; her 12-year-old sister washed clothes for another family on an old-fashioned scrub board. At the end of six months Erna had earned enough money to buy a new outfit, including a pair of Oxford shoes for \$2.

In the early 1930s, now a teenager, she left home to work at the Miners' Hospital in Blairmore. It was long days, with only an occasional day off on the weekend and a 10-mile walk to visit her mother and brothers. She had to cook the day's meals for the patients, the doctor and the nurse, clean the floors three times a week, wash the linen, and wax the kitchen floor daily. At one point, her mother came to stay with her while recovering from a bout of sciatica. After watching her for a few days, she asked, "Do you ever stop running, Erna?"

"I can't," she replied.

ABOVE: Erna's mother put everything to vegetables, but when she retired she allowed herself some colour from cornflowers and calendulas. OPPOSITE TOP: Erna has experimented with pin oak, bamboo and a Gala apple tree on her modest mining village lot. Here, another view of her poppies, calendulas and corn flowers. OPPOSITE RIGHT: Lupines and Shirley poppies are part of the season-long colour.



Eventually, wanderlust pushed her to far-flung places like the Mt. Assiniboine Lodge, where she worked with the legendary Erling Strom; then it was Vancouver; then Whitehorse, where she worked for the U.S. Army during the Second World War. Her sense of gardening fell dormant.

In the late 1940s, just about when her mother moved into the new cabin in Beaver Mines, Erna moved back to southern Alberta, to a job in Pincher Creek, and eventually to run her own business. Whenever she could she went out to Beaver Mines to visit her mother, and to help with the garden. But until she bought her first car in 1961, the visits were infrequent.

Soon after her mother's death in 1974, Erna retired and moved into the cabin without running water and heated with wood, living as her mother had for 25 years. It was then she took over the garden.

Some people lose a taste for things they've been immersed in, like a retired soldier who doesn't care for hiking, but Erna, who gardened with a sense of urgency throughout her childhood, came back to it with passion and pleasure.

She inherited her mother's beloved herb garden, continuing the parsley and caraway, started from seeds her mother had brought over from Europe. Louise had grown mostly vegetables and some flowers—Erna still has her vermouth plants and some red peonies. Over time, her





brothers had contributed several trees, now the oldtimers of the place: a green ash and a mountain ash, a spruce tree transplanted from the Pass, a Japanese lilac, a blue spruce and Manitoba maples.

But slowly Erna began to press her imprint on the grounds.

She had a house next door with running water and central heating. She continued to live in the cabin, but gave the amenities of the bungalow mostly to the house plants, exotic and colourful, such as her papaya and poinsettias. It was, and is, a place to begin the next experiment and the seedlings for the next season.

This sense of experimentation infuses the garden. She has hawthorn trees, a pin oak which now stands two metres tall, an Austrian pine, Nanking cherry and a white lilac tree. Then there's the two-metre prairie dawn rose, a China doll rose and up until a while ago a rose tree of China.

She's got a horse chestnut (now five metres), and Spartan and New Zealand Gala apple trees, whose annual produce never matures.

She's grown red cauliflower, endive, green Hubbard squash. She's had success with chickpeas, with buckwheat

and sainfoin clover. She's grown a standing cypress, and her bamboo was so successful she finally had to do it in.

She's had variegated dogwood and ginala maple, both of which she also gave to her brother, "but he lost them all."

Her latest challenge is to grow, from seed a friendly neighbour gave her, a giant sequoia, more commonly associated with the rain forests of the West Coast.

Like any gardener, she reads through the seed catalogues every winter, conjuring her garden for the upcoming season. "If I see something I like, I get it," she exclaims. "I worry sometimes it won't grow, but I get it anyway." Then she laughs and adds, "Some years you have luck with a plant, some years not. I've lost a lot of stuff over the years."

While imprisoned indoors, she tends to her exotics that stand on top of homemade shelving in front of the south-facing window. She's had several African milk trees. During one period she grew a papaya tree eight feet high, then gave it to her brother in Lethbridge who had a higher ceiling.

In 1998, she sold her mother's place and moved into the bungalow next door. The new owners are enthusiastic about the garden they now tend, but it still wears

ABOVE: Mixed in with white lamiums are "white chip" campanulas, "gloriosa" daisies, petunias and calendulas. The lamium started out as a house plant. OPPOSITE: Erna starts many of her plants, like this pink dianthus, from seeds; others come as gifts from friends. Rufous hummingbirds are most common in the neighbourhood, with the occasional calliope. Gloves, just hanging around waiting for Erna to get back to work.



Erna's touch, and she waters the plants during the week while the owners are away.

Her new home had little for a garden. What it did have was there by chance—a bunch of pheasant-eye lilies had taken root after being thrown over the hedge from the cabin and expected to waste away.

Every year she expands it, digging up the soil where it's softest, following the contours of the land. "I don't plan anything," she says. "I just follow my nose." She uses a gardening tool that came over with her parents from Austria almost 100 years ago. It is a mini-adze, mounted on a stout ash handle. It breaks up grass-bound soil and cuts through roots 'til the soil is granular and supple, and can scoop a small plant out of the ground in a size and condition perfect for transplanting.

In her 80s, she's fit. But she approaches her garden expansion gradually. "I do a little bit every day, and it's surprising what you can get done."

An opportunist in this slow conversion from wild grass and shrub to cultivated flower garden, she'll scoop up topsoil from a gopher mound, sand from a creek's flood plain into her ever ready bucket in the back of the car. Or she laughs, a little guiltily, that she's grabbed cones from the paper birch growing outside the post office in town to plant at home—and as if in rebuke to her perceived sense of theft, none have taken.

She's plagued with chinooks, with a short growing sea-

son, with dry summers, and deer—"those little devils"—are her nemesis. But she perseveres, backs off, moves around, tries something else, and slowly her garden grows.

She tries to water twice a day and, with a little embarrassment, admits to talking to the plants and vegetables. She says she could do more, but her attitude is Darwinian. "You're going to live or you're going to die on your own," she tells the plants, so what grows is hardy. "They've never been babied; if they don't survive, I try something else."

This tough love approach doesn't seem to hurt, since almost everything she handles grows with great good will.

And gardening gives back to her. "Working with the soil gives me peacefulness. I forget my troubles. It's therapeutic."

Erna Kelly's experiences have cultivated a sense of adventure. (She still climbs into her trusty old station wagon and heads for Kelowna or Jasper on her own, or the Yukon if somebody else is driving.) They have also endowed her with good humour, perseverance, a need for little and a sense of receiving everything as a gift.

These are useful and trusty tools to take into the garden on a fine spring day.

**David McNeill** is a writer and next door neighbour to Erna Kelly. Under her guidance, he's trying hard to add 'gardener' to his resume.

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