

Never too late

Pick up perennials and inspiration on this garden centre tour

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Late summer seems like a more appropriate time for gin-and-tonics on the deck than heavy lifting in the garden. But a country drive beside the river, past fruit stands and undulating green fields, is a refreshing way to spend a day. And you can actually improve your garden at the same time, by picking up ideas and a few prized perennials.

We're taking the slow road to Burritts Rapids, past pretty scenery to some of the region's most interesting garden centres.

Our first destination is Rideau Woodland Ramble, but first, some sage advice from one of its owners. I asked Robert Caron whether he's able to enjoy his stunning seven-acre garden, or whether, like many gardeners, he only sees all that needs to be done.

"If you look at the whole thing, it's way too overwhelming," he says. "The weeds are bad this year ... So you have to break it down by section and take it one area at a time. That's how you stay on top. You don't worry about what people might say about the parts you haven't got to yet."

Rideau Woodland Ramble It's about a 45-minute drive from Ottawa. Although you can get there more quickly on Highway 416 through Kemptville, the scenic route starts by heading south on Prince of Wales Drive (also called Old Highway 16 and new Highway 73). For most of the route it ambles beside the Rideau River, but you veer west into North Gower; at the traffic lights in town, continue south, following the signs to Kemptville. This road curves to the right as it hits the river; you'll pass Rideau River Provincial Park, where you could stop for a swim. Soon after, the main road veers left over the river to Kemptville; set your odometer and keep going straight, following the sign to Merrickville and Burritts Rapids. At 14 kilometres, turn left between two heritage painted homes.

This road takes you over two scenic bridges and you'll arrive on the other side at Burritts Rapids Road. Turn left, following the road as it curves right (Leeds and Grenville Road 23). It's just 2.5 kilometres to Rideau Woodland Ramble, which is well-marked at 210 Burritts Rapids Rd.



CREDIT: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen

Japanese Red Maple leaves make a striking contrast to the quilt-like leaves of Francee Hostas at the Rideau Woodland Ramble in Burritts Rapids.

Caron's partner is David Dunn, an architect by training. As soon as you get out of your car and gaze up the walk to the gazebo, with symmetrical rows of statuesque conifers on either side, you know you've arrived at somewhere special: Rideau Woodland Ramble is a garden-changing experience. You'll find yourself thinking bigger -- in terms of architectural evergreens and graceful flowering shrubs, ponds with fountains, and sculptures tucked among the trees.

You can walk along one of many "rambles" mapped out by Caron and Dunn, and if you're inspired by what you see, you can likely buy it. They stock about 300 different types of hostas and about 100 kinds of rare conifers, for example, and customers come from as far away as Newfoundland and Windsor.

This weekend, the daylilies should be in their glory, says Caron. There's also a big sale on and I defy you not to come home with some big beauty in your backseat, your knees pushed up against the dashboard to accommodate it, as I have each time I've gone there.

See ww.rideauwoodlandramble.com for more.

Down to Earth Gardens

On your way in to Rideau Woodlands, you likely noticed a sign to Down to Earth Gardens. Head back the way you came, then turn left onto Haskins Road at the sign; continue down the gravel road for about five minutes, to 420 Haskins Rd.

The long farmhouse lane is lined with a colourful profusion of brown-eyed susans, daylilies and purple coneflowers.

"Worth the drive for plants that will thrive," is owner Patti Pokorchak's motto, and she describes her specialty as "easy-care plants for novice, busy and black-thumb gardeners." Those flowers along the farm drive are robust, but you can bet that they're not getting any tender nurturing.

"No demanding prima donnas here," says Pokorchak, who had enough of stress in her previous life in high-tech. "Ten years ago I knew two kinds of flowers: daisies and marigolds. I wanted to open the kind of place I'd like to visit -- with easy-care plants, reasonable prices and advice without any Latin names."

Pokorchak stocks more than 200 varieties of perennials, including many of the ones that were once named perennials of the year for their hardiness and long-flowering times. I couldn't resist an astilbe called 'Vision in Red' that's actually a gorgeous plush purple and -- get this -- thrives in dry shade.

On Sunday, Aug. 6, from 1 to 4 p.m. (rain date Aug. 13), Pokorchak is holding her annual garden party, with her garden at its best, sale prices on perennials, music, edible flower creations to sample, hemp clothing on sale and a rope-making demonstration -- "more interesting than it sounds" she promises.

See www.downtoearthgardens.ca for details.

Merrickville

It's just a 10-minute drive into Merrickville from Burritts Rapids and it's a spectacularly pretty one along the east side of the Rideau River on Burritts Rapids Road.

Gardeners recommend Hucklebuck's, Windsor's Courtyard and Dream Escape Farm as must-stops for garden accessories. Sam Jakes and a new Italian restaurant, called The Locks, have fine dining on outdoor patios (The Locks overlooking the river) and several other places have more casual fare. I can recommend the cinnamon and the green-tea infusion gelatos at the Downtown Ice cream and Candy Shoppe, as well as the "wicked" fresh cut fries at the Chip Witch. See www.realmerrickville.ca for more.

Gardens North

If you do this outing on Aug. 18, 19 or 20, you can vary the route to take in the final open garden weekend at Gardens North, where owner Kristl Walek specializes in growing native and exotic plants from seed. An authority on the arcane points of seed collection and germination, Walek sells her seeds all over the world. Her country garden is an exotic wonderland of the unexpected, with silver thistles towering over your head, waterfalls hidden by masses of native plants and huge beds of cacti. And she's selling off all the plants in her nursery at half price that weekend.

To make this detour, turn right off Prince of Wales Drive right after it goes up and over new Highway 16, onto Century Road West (the turn is 16.5 kilometres from Hunt Club Road.) Go two kilometres on Century Road to a left turn onto Third Line Road. Gardens North will be on your right after 2.9 kilometres (the sign is virtually obscured by foliage, but watch for a log archway over the driveway.)

See gardensnorth.com for more.

Rideau Nursery

If you've detoured to take in Gardens North, don't miss the lovely Rideau Nursery on your way to Burritts Rapids. Continue south on Third Line Road when you leave Gardens North, turn right onto Carsonby Road West, then left onto Fourth Line Road, which takes you into North Gower. At the traffic light, go right onto Roger Stevens Drive and continue 1.8 kilometres to a left on McCordick Road: it's now 2.9 kilometres to the well-marked Rideau Nursery.

This two-acre garden, which began as a cut-flower farm, has a great selection of unusual and pretty perennials (it sets itself apart by not specializing in daylilies or hostas) that have proven to grow well in our climate; it also has extremely reasonable prices and attractive gifts in a small barn.

See <http://rideaunursery.com> for more.

To pick up the route to Burritts Rapids, continue south on McCordick until it hits Donnelly; turn right.

Laura Robin is the editor of Style Weekly Travel and an avid gardener. Greenspace appears every second week.

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