

Plant partners

Ramble down to Merrickville for garden design workshop

BY AILSA FRANCIS, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

JULY 6, 2012



Dave Dunn and Rob Caron have run Rideau Woodland Ramble for the last 12 years. Dunn says they are 'finally hitting their stride.'

Photograph by: Pat McGrath, Ottawa Citizen

As they walked up the long country driveway with their realtor and saw the house, Dave Dunn knew at first glance that this was going to be “the one.” Surrounded by woods, the home had just been completed, but after the owner realized he couldn’t settle so far from town, it was put on the market after never actually being lived in. It didn’t hurt that it also had a pool. So in 1981, after sharing a Centretown apartment and then a west-end condo, Dunn and his partner Rob Caron bought their first and perhaps “forever” home just outside Merrickville.

Today it sits next to their labour of love, Rideau Woodland Ramble nursery, a plant wonderland that specializes in choice conifers, unusual trees and a well-chosen selection of perennials.

“After 12 years, I think we’ve finally hit our stride,” says Dunn. Later this month, Dunn will be guiding participants in a garden-design workshop at the Ramble. This event is a fundraiser for the Ottawa Botanical Garden Society and its hope to create a world-class botanical garden here in the nation’s capital.

If anyone has had experience creating a garden over time, it is these two. One might say that this spectacular demonstration nursery was born of disaster and destiny. The first disaster came in the form of Ontario Hydro, which arrived one day while no one was home and clear-cut a path from the road to their house, following the hydro lines. Suddenly there was a swath of devastation, with the remnants of those felled red pines lying helter-skelter on the ground.

This man-made disaster gave the pair a chance to hone their skills developing their own personal woodland garden. They learned about naturally occurring woodland soil inhibitors and hosta fatigue (from lack of lime) and developed dreams of growing giant rhododendrons that you can stand under as well as plants that weren’t supposed to survive in our climate.

The next disaster was the Great Ice Storm of 1998, when much of the area where the nursery and pond are now sited was cleared after fallen and damaged trees had to be removed. That catastrophic event seemed to cement the notion of expanding their personal garden into a commercial enterprise.

But don't think that this is simply a business: despite its generous size, Dunn and Caron have managed to make Rideau Woodland Ramble a personal experience for everyone who visits. This is because they have carefully designed not only the extensive display gardens that embrace and encircle the pond, but also the actual nursery. Custom-made picnic benches hold pots of lush perennials under a canopy of honeylocust trees and attractive wrought-iron signs identify the sale areas. There is now also a small cabin (with a beckoning bistro table and chairs on the front porch) for displaying Dunn's paintings and offering hot coffee and cookies. Upon entering the nursery, the visitor's sight line is directed past a striking conifer display, through the now iconic gazebo and onward to the pond's fountain.

The soft-spoken guy always wearing a cap is Rob Caron. He's the primary plant geek of the two and counts his childhood neighbour, George Rofner, the creator of Richmond Nursery, as his earliest gardening mentor. Caron grew up on Ontario Street in south Richmond and Richmond Nursery began virtually in his backyard. From the age of seven, Caron learned not only about plants, but also developed a rigorous work ethic. He doesn't suffer fools gladly, but will spend hours trying to help you find the right combination of plants for your garden because, well, he can't help it. After graduating from Algonquin College's horticulture program in 1976, he continued working with plants until making a complete change by taking a job in the registrar's office at St. Lawrence College. But in 2000, after they opened the nursery, he began running its daily operations and has done so ever since.

The dapper guy who is essentially the "frontman" for the nursery is Dave Dunn. He expected to become an artist, but heeded the voices of family members who said "that's no way to make a living" and opted for an architecture degree at Carleton University instead.

Growing plants was in his blood too, however. Dunn grew up in Sudbury with a dad and grandfather who successfully grew vegetables in the toxic conditions produced by the smelting process. After 33 years working at Bell Northern Research and then Nortel, Dunn has now made good on his dream of retiring and spending his days painting and running the nursery alongside Caron.

You don't need to be a plant lover to enjoy this place, but if you are, you'll be enthralled by the selection: *Stewartia*, check; dove tree, check; bald cypress, check; variegated hemlock, check. Go — you won't be sorry.

Ailsa Francis's blog can be found at hortus2.wordpress.com.

Workshop

What: Dave Dunn, co-owner of Rideau Woodland Ramble nursery, will be giving a garden-design workshop, with an emphasis on woodland and shade gardening, in support of the Ottawa Botanical Garden Society.

When: Saturday, July 21, from 10 a.m. to noon

Where: Rideau Woodland Ramble, 210 Burritt's Rapids Road (County Road 23), Merrickville

Cost: \$15 for Ottawa Botanical Garden Society members; \$20 for non-members

More: www.rideauwoodlandramble.com or 613-258-3797

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The pond area was established after fallen trees had to be cleared as a result of the ice storm of 1998.

Photograph by: Pat McGrath, Ottawa Citizen