

The art of rambling: Rideau Woodland

Ramble enchants visitors

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The Ottawa Citizen

Saturday, September 03, 2005

Ramble: a walk taken for pleasure, with or without a definite route.

The other day I rambled up and down and all around. In fact, I rambled so much I needed to rest and really soak in my surroundings. From the parking lot at Rideau Woodland Ramble I saw a sign that said RWR and another that invited me to ramble. So I did.

Was I at a wellness retreat centre, a northern garden paradise or a garden centre (which the brochure assured me it was)? Wherever, I sure was happy and definitely relaxed. During my ramble, I stumbled across a beautiful garden centre carved out of a thick pine forest. I quickly walked to the main entrance (which is just off the parking lot) and was enchanted, the way most people are when in the presence of art.

It was now time to find the proprietor of this fine establishment and get the dirt on RWR. Sitting in the mammoth-sized garden gazebo (which doubles as a sales desk and lounging area) was Robert Caron. He was easy to spot with his company logo T-shirt and matching hat. He graduated from Algonquin College's horticulture and landscaping program and spent 15 years in the nursery industry working for several notable businesses in the Ottawa area. He then landed a desk job but continued to garden around his home. The majority of the gardens in the ramble are Robert's and he has been working on them for close to 25 years.

The 1998 ice storm changed many people's lives, including those of Robert and his partner and companion David Dunn. The storm destroyed a huge swath of their property, and as they began their massive clean-up, an idea took shape, one that had been brewing for some time: The newly cleared area would become a garden centre. They set about planning and designing, hoping to create a unique space. They have certainly accomplished that.

The garden centre uses the layout of the seven-acre rectangular lot to its fullest, highlighting its length through the use of linear paths and focal points. Although it is brimming with plant material, you never feel overwhelmed because groups of plants are displayed in separate areas, encouraging further exploration. Along with the mammoth gazebo, large picnic tables with umbrellas display Robert and David's perennial collection. It all creates a warm cottage feeling, with a slight hint of boutique.

The main entrance is where they display Robert's real passion, evergreens. While respecting the old favorites, he is very much into rare plants and new trends. Many of his customers are seeking rare and unusual evergreens and other woody plants. At the back of the property, he has even planted an evergreen display garden so potential buyers can see what the plant will look like years from now. In fact, one of the main purposes of the ramble gardens is to teach what goes well together and what each plant will do once it's out of the pot.

Distinctive garden art is displayed throughout the gardens and in the sales areas. I have purchased little statues and stepping stones, but I am rarely happy with their placement. But at RWR, placement has been mastered. I asked David (the art collector) the intention behind the artworks and how he managed to integrate them into the garden so effortlessly.

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"The art is used to draw the eye, to create a sense of destination and surprise," he said. "Sometimes it is used to make an announcement or used for direction and other times it is purely used to create reaction."



This is clearly seen in David's newest addition, a life-sized sculpture of three women who seem very innocent, yet slightly provocative. The art is collected from all over, including locally and even as far away as China (David still has a day job with Nortel and travels frequently).

The garden centre has flourished and changed in many ways since its first year of business in 1999. Robert and David want to improve on what they already have; they don't want to get bigger, they want to get better. But as true gardeners there is always room for more. They mention plans for a new garden around their newest sculpture, perhaps a sunken garden in a newly discovered abandoned quarry, and maybe even a teahouse that serves beverages and light meals.

What were the most valuable lessons they've learned in gardening? "You need to break the rules to learn," says David, and adds, "you can't plant directly into woodland soil because there are natural growth inhibitors; you need to bring in a good six to 12 inches of top soil."

Robert's most valuable lesson is "to really know your location, including soil type, light levels and winter conditions to see if a plant really fits/belongs there." He also advises that if you are coming to the garden centre with a specific question, bring a picture of the location you wish to plant in. This will help him find you a better plant.

Rideau Woodland Ramble is located just outside Merrickville on the Burritt's Rapids Road. Currently, there is a 25-per-cent-off sale on all plant material. **For more information visit www.rideauwoodland-ramble.com or telephone 258-3797.**

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