

A Woodland Ramble

Merrickville-area centre offers aspiring gardeners a blooming fine stroll

By Louisa Taylor, The Ottawa Citizen May 23, 2009

Everyone's a gardener these days, or so it seems, and every big-box store with an extra patch of concrete seems to think it's a garden centre. This is convenient, but hardly inspiring. After a three-year hiatus from serious gardening (I blame the arrival of two kids, moving and the trauma of a big renovation), I am a gardener in desperate need of horticultural recharging. I can't remember the Latin names and I often mistake weeds for fine specimens, but I love nothing more than digging in the dirt and watching things grow. Which is why I decided to head to Merrickville.



Why Merrickville?

In the dead of winter I spied an ad for Rideau Woodland Ramble in a gardening magazine. A spin through their website (www.rideauwoodlandramble.com) suggested many reasons to go -- the display garden, the nursery, the whole idea of a ramble through woodland and garden. The Ramble's mission is "to capture the imagination of gardeners and collectors" in seven acres of woodland gardens and paths. It's open from April to November, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., seven days a week, rain or shine. So when my husband asked if I had any special birthday requests, I asked to take the whole family Rambling -- including two children, 6 and 21/2 years old. With any luck, everyone would enjoy meandering among the greenery and I'd come home with ideas galore and a few plants in the trunk. As a bonus, we'd have lunch in Merrickville afterward.

That was a gamble. Did the kids co-operate?

They did, but the weather didn't. It had poured the day before, and now it was dry but the sky was lead grey with a biting wind and the temperature hovering around 5 C. But just getting out of the city felt great, and once we were out and walking, no one seemed to mind.

Where did you start?

We took Highway 416 south to exit 34, turning onto Highway 43 for Merrickville. After about 12 kilometres we turned right onto Burritts Rapids Road, and spotted the elegant little dark green RWR sign on the left.

From the small gravel parking lot, we followed an inviting path between rows of evergreens to Ramble House, a large glass and wood gazebo with comfortable sofas and welcoming staff.

We were given a map of the various gardens and told where to avoid the soggy patches and that when we reached the fish pond, we could feed the fish if they looked hungry. The kids couldn't wait to get started, so we headed for the woods.

They garden in the woods?

Owners Dave Dunn and Rob Caron have created numerous different garden spaces, including plantings among the pine trees flanking the house, with Japanese maples, rhododendrons, azaleas, and more. There's a "babbling pond" tucked into one side and everywhere you looked, there was something beautiful and something quietly fun, especially the vast amount of garden art.

Like gnomes and jockey statues?

More like eclectic treasures sprinkled through the landscape, as diverse as abstract metal sculptures anchoring a clearing or ceramic creatures tucked among the hostas. The kids were thrilled to wander hand-in-hand along the paths, spotting the artwork tucked among the trees (frogs climbing trees! birds pecking the forest floor! twirling globes of glass hanging from branches!).

Sounds like fun, but what about the flowers?

There weren't all that many blooming for our visit, but everything was still a delight to behold -- proof that Caron and Dunn have reached their goal of having something of interest all year long. We emerged from the woods to a gravel path and wound our way along elegant beds of conifers, tree shrubs and hostas, plus the occasional bunch of sunny daffodils. Hostas are their specialty -- the greenhouse was packed with them.

We ended up at the large pond speckled with goldfish -- a big hit with the kids. After feeding them from a container on a picnic table, we passed a few pleasant minutes watching them bob and glide just below the surface.

Was it a long walk?

We spent about 35 minutes wandering the property, even though many beds were just getting started. A visit later in the summer, with more to look at, could easily stretch out longer. After the pond, we got down to business in the retail area of the property, with dozens of rows of healthy, full perennials begging to be taken home. Some of them were still in the neat and orderly greenhouses -- and that's not all that was in the greenhouses. There were kittens, adorable black and white fluffballs frolicking among the Japanese maples. That led to the only down note of the visit, as the staff announced -- several times! -- that we were welcome to take one home. Allergies in the family prevent us from having any furry pets, so the result was one broken-hearted six-year-old sobbing on my shoulder at regular intervals as I shopped. She perked up when Stephanie, one of the staff, helped her find a perennial for herself. They chose salvia, and Stephanie explained how to plant it in full sun and cut it back in the fall.

Did you go overboard on the shopping?

I can't imagine going there and NOT buying masses. It's the antithesis of the big-box garden centre. The shapes of beds, the way the plantings are organized and balanced for size and shape and colour, the expert advice on offer -- all get you smiling and thinking about your own garden -- even if it's a dandelion-filled disaster, as mine was that week. I left with a head full of ideas and a trunk full of perennials, including some unusual sedum, a few intriguing globe thistles and the salvia.

Where did you go for lunch?

We drove about 10 minutes further along Highway 43 into the town of Merrickville, which has several good lunch options. We chose the Yellow Canoe Cafe on St. Lawrence Street. It's in a great spot -- across from the Blockhouse Museum -- and the service was excellent. They had a healthy kids' menu, including a veggie and fruit plate, and a grilled cheese sandwich made with delicious whole grain bread. The most popular dishes at our table were the roasted garlic and tomato soup, the apple pie and the chocolate chunk cookies. Their patio looks like a good spot to enjoy a summer meal. No need for reservations, but for hours and more information you could call 613-269-2833 or go to www.yellowcanoecafe.com

Did you explore Merrickville?

We would have loved to stroll through town and linger at the canal locks, but we had kids in desperate need of a nap, so we hit the highway, promising ourselves we'd be back to see more of Merrickville -- and of the Rideau Woodland Ramble -- later in the summer.

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