



# DIY gardening IN THE DOWNTOWN

Catherine Owens' experimental wildflower garden pays off, giving a back corner a burst of colour.



Patio view from the garden

## *Former suburban dweller's hard work and tasteful updates breathe new life into Kitchener property*

BY KATHRYN STORRING  
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It's an ordinary home in an ordinary midtown Kitchener neighbourhood. At least it was when it caught Catherine Owens' eye in the fall of 2012.

Since then, the house, which is more than 150 years old, has had impressive updates, including a new front portico and a spacious great room added across the back.

But from the sidewalk, it's the landscaping that catches the eye – the way the tall planters and Karl Foerster ornamental grasses frame the front steps; the way the yellow lilies and shapely shrubs guide the eye to the plants marching back to the garage; or the way the huge fern spills out of a pot, fronting the garden on the other side of the steps.

From there, the eye drifts to the next layer, a large garden tucked into the corner of the house in front of a main-floor bedroom.

Now, Owens will tell you she is no green thumb – that a lot is just trial and error. But

if that's the case, there is obviously some garden wizardry at work. Further evidence awaits in her backyard, where perennial gardens spill out of the fences and every nook and corner, framing two patios, an entrance walkway and a stylish gazebo.

"A lot of my gardening is just old stand-by perennials," Owens says modestly as she shows her visitors around. We are accompanied by the affable Molly, a retriever-lab pooch trained as a therapy dog. Molly makes regular visits to Kitchener's Sunnyside Home when she isn't assisting with garden tours.

"It's easy to garden if you have friends and relatives who are interested in splitting their perennials," Owens says with a smile.

Indeed, she has lots of recognizable plants, including hostas, irises, bee balm, daisies, coreopsis, peonies, spireas and sedums. But the results are not commonplace, especially considering her projects have only been forged over four summers. Beds are carefully shaped, and some plants are more



unusual – holly, speedwell and ninebark, for example. There are also striking ornamental grasses – Karl Foerster, miscanthus and black mongo.

Still, Owens exhibits no embarrassment if she can't name one of her beauties. "It's groundcover," she says with a laugh when asked about one grouping. "Green and white."

And she shrugs off garden missteps. She planted four alliums, for example, not realizing they would self-seed. Now there are about 20 plants, poking out of a flowerbed like tall aliens. Some gardeners might be annoyed, especially since these marauders have taken up residence in a manicured section of garden. But Owens

accepts it as just another gardening surprise.

**T**here's little question Owens' relaxed attitude has been built on a foundation of hard work, hours that she has willingly poured into the property as part of her early retirement from Manulife, where she was vice-president of investment management services.

She did garden at her former Kitchener home – "a big house in the burbs" – but most of her former backyard was taken up by a pool. Her current lot, a generous 68 feet by 120 feet, had much greater potential. One side of her backyard stretches along a public laneway, a lush

Catherine Owens and her dog, Molly, take time out in the gazebo, which provides a stylish anchor in the backyard of her Kitchener home.

vine disguising the tall fence. Another fence ends at her back parking area. On the third side, she has installed fence panels instead of a full structure so that neighbours' small backyards can feel less constricted.

What brought her to the core of the city? "I was retired and I was spending a lot of time walking around," she says. "But it's not as interesting walking in the burbs as it is in the main areas." From her new home, she can easily access places such as the main branch of the Kitchener Public Library, restaurants and events in Victoria Park.

She is also fascinated by her evolving urban community. "People choose to live here," she says in describing a mixed neighbourhood with lots of families, professionals – and "little libraries."

"The people who live here are passionate about maintaining their neighbourhood."

And she is too. She was even part of a "stakeholder committee" for the city planning department's Residential Intensification in Established Neighbourhoods Study, which helped pave the way for new guidelines for redevelopment initiatives.

Still, Owens sometimes has to defend her neighbourhood to suburban friends.

"They always say to me, 'Catherine, are you not afraid to live downtown?'"

But to Owens, an active community is a safe community.

"There are more people on the street in downtown than there are anywhere in the suburbs. There are people walking by, on a bicycle, with their kids, every five minutes in front of my house here."

**O**wens' search for a downtown house took about a year, but once she found it, she wasted no time in making it her own. First came the elegant great room across the back, perfect for activities such as family gatherings at Christmas. A garage and a large storage area complete the addition.

"I moved in on Halloween (in 2012) and the contractors started building the addition a week and a half later," she says.

Contractors have also installed two patios. A brick patio, laid in 2013, stretches

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**Top:** Mother Nature helped create this main flower bed by ripping down a huge willow, roots and all, in the December 2013 ice storm.

**Above:** Miscanthus grasses make a striking statement in a side garden along the great room addition.

**Right:** Thick vines and plantings disguise a tall fence, while outlining an entrance walkway.

across the great room, creating an inviting space for entertaining with its table for six, barbecue and pretty café table on a colourful rug. A bar and two stools tuck into a corner.

The second patio, built in 2014, is home to the gazebo, its attractive furnishings gathered around a propane fire pit. Nearby, a wood-burning fire pit promises to warm a cool evening in a more traditional way.

In December 2013, the property received an unexpected design intervention from Mother Nature. A destructive ice storm damaged some tall pines, which had to

be removed, and it brought down a huge willow, roots and all. It was a disaster – and a mess – at the time, but this was actually opportunity knocking.

The hole where the willow roots had

been now defines part of Owens' main flowerbed. This bold bed, punctuated by a Japanese maple, swoops from the gazebo to the back of the property.

She laughs when asked about the nuances of the flowerbed. Did she map it on paper? Did she test the shape using string or some other clever method? No, she simply gathered up the bricks left over from the first patio, set out a shape, and put in some plants.

Of course, it wasn't that simple. For this garden bed and the ones that followed, Owens did her own digging, lifting out heavy shovelfuls of grass to be composted. She worked up and enriched the new soil, levelled any bricks used for the edging, and worked out where to place plants, solar lights and garden art.

One space, a "mystery garden" along a back fence, truly came down to serendipity. Owens opened this section last spring, added fertilizer and sprinkled on a package of wildflower seeds that promised to attract butterflies and pollinators. She placed kale, heuchera and hostas for good measure, but the rest was left to chance. By July, the space was a blur of colour – blues, reds, salmon and green. Colourful art pieces are the crowning touch.

Owens has now stopped looking for spots for new beds – perhaps because most of the corners and fence lines are filled. And after a burst of cleanup and renewal activity in the spring, she doesn't go looking for weeds or other problems. She does watch for plants that aren't well suited to their surroundings, but she doesn't fret if they have to wait for ideal transplant timing.

Besides, she has found a new outlet for some of her gardening passion. She has joined the Kitchener Horticultural Society, which featured her property in a garden tour in 2015, and she helps with some of their programs. At \$10 per year, membership is "the best deal in town," Owens says.

It probably helps that programming runs through the winter, getting gardeners like Owens through their downtime – and fired up for spring. ☺



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