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# Poppies and dandelions

*McCrae's volunteer gardeners know when to nurture... and when to ignore*

BY JOANNE SHUTTLEWORTH  
PHOTOGRAPHY • ROB MASSEY

If you think you're helping the volunteer gardeners at McCrae House by plucking the odd weed or dead-heading finished blooms as you pass by, well, just step away from the flowers.

They may be weeds by today's standards, where gardens are grown primarily to be beautiful, but back in the day, the cottage garden had a greater purpose, and weeds were a part of it.

And like the museum they surround, the gardens at McCrae House are designed to offer a glimpse of what life



The house, at 108 Water St. in Guelph, is where the author of "In Flanders Fields" was born.



**LEFT:** A striking stone entranceway leads into the John McCrae memorial gardens, adjacent to McCrae House.

**ABOVE:** Harriet Hull is one of the volunteers who tend to the gardens that surround McCrae House.

was like in Guelph in the late 1800s, when Lt. Col. John McCrae was born in this stone house on Water Street, on the edge of the Speed River.

“Come and pull weeds in my backyard,” says Harriet Hull with a laugh. “But leave them alone at McCrae House.”

Hull is one of about 10 volunteers who maintain the gardens at this museum honouring McCrae, a doctor and soldier remembered for his famous poem “In Flanders Fields,” which he penned in 1915 near Ypres in Belgium. McCrae House, which is also dedicated to First World War history, holds numerous events each year, especially around Remembrance Day.

The museum had a particularly big year in 2015 when “In Flanders Fields” celebrated its 100th anniversary. In preparation, McCrae House was closed for six months while it underwent a \$159,000 renovation.

New showcases were installed and changes made to the flow inside the cottage. The period bedroom and dining room were removed as they told little about McCrae the man. Now there’s more space for more visitors and room to reflect on the poem, which is prominently featured.

The changes have allowed the museum to tell McCrae’s story in a different way, highlighting different artifacts in the collection and focusing on McCrae the doctor, the writer and the soldier.

The exterior was also spruced up with a new walkway and metal arbour at the gate. And even though the gardens around the house were already well established, “there was a rush to have it ready for the celebration,” Hull says. “We couldn’t get in the gardens as early or as often as we would have liked. A lot of people went through the museum that year.”

It’s not that the grounds are precisely manicured or impossibly formal. Quite the opposite. There are times in the summer when they might look sloppy, as if the volunteer gardeners had all gone on vacation at the same time. At such times, spent blooms have gone to seed, and stems sprawl across the ground from the weight. Dandelions are left to thrive wherever they take root. And they all droop from the stress of a hot, dry summer.

But this is by design.

“This is different from gardening at home. We keep these gardens the way Mrs. McCrae would have kept them,” Hull says. “It’s a whole different mindset.”

**M**cCrae House officially became a museum in 1968 thanks to the efforts of the Lt. Col. John McCrae Birthplace Society, and it became part of Guelph

Museums in 1983. It is also a National Historic Site.

But it wasn’t until 1998 when volunteers installed the historic gardens in an initiative spearheaded by Dorothy Scott.

“It was necessary when I saw what the parks department was doing,” said Scott in an interview.

“I saw summer students leaving weeds and digging up plants. So I stormed in and volunteered to be a weeder.”

Scott calls herself an amateur gardener, but over the years has amassed an extensive library in her basement on gardens and plants from the era. She devised the garden plan and rounded up some volunteers.

“I had to learn it all,” she says. “But that was the fun part for me.”

It’s also the hardest part for new volunteers, she says – to set aside modern gardening sensibilities and instead work the land like a pioneer.

Water is drawn from a rain barrel. Seeds are collected and planted by hand or more likely left to self-seed. Critter or other infestations are handled in traditional ways without chemicals or commercial products.

“The people who work with me are so helpful and so willing to go along with my crazy ideas,” Scott says with a laugh. “The people really are the best part of this.”

Indeed, Hull notes that Scott, who is now in her 90s, rules the roost.

Hull had to get special permission from Scott to add mushroom manure to the soil in the plot of land she takes care of.

“The McCraes would have used manure to amend the soil so we can too. But no mulch,” Hull says. “They never would have mulched.”

Val Harrison, supervisor of visitor experiences at Guelph Museums, says Scott has been volunteer co-ordinator for about 20 years.

“She has such energy for our projects and she’s a great recruiter,” Harrison says. “And the garden is such a good project for volunteers. It complements what we’re doing inside.”

Hull says each volunteer takes responsibility for a patch of the garden. Once they log

40 hours, they receive a pass to Guelph Museums. She says the team works together in the spring and fall to clean up the garden and prepare it for the season, but the rest of the time they work out their own schedules. Hull says she tries to avoid times when events are going on at McCrae House, especially outdoor events.

**W**hile the garden features heritage flowers that are quite beautiful and fragrant when in bloom, cottage gardens were also a source of food and medicine for a family and often had to produce enough to get them through a winter. And they had to produce enough seeds to do it again the following year. It would have been no different for the McCraes.

“They would want the flowers to re-seed so they wouldn’t deadhead,” Hull says. “They wouldn’t have time for it anyway. And some of the weeds are actually edible and would be used in salads.”

Those were the days when bread was baked daily, when butter was churned by hand, laundry was scrubbed on a scrub board, and food had to be pickled or preserved if you planned to eat in the winter.

Life was hard, and busy. There was little time to grow flowers just because they were pretty.

So it was common to have a potager garden, Hull says – a combination of flowers, vegetables and herbs. And almost every plant would have been used for food, ointments, teas and flavourings in cooking.

At McCrae House, the front garden is shaped in a semi-circle bisected by a walkway and stairs to the front porch. The garden continues along the side of the house with a vegetable garden on the far side of the path. The backyard has many large shade trees, and the museum holds afternoon teas and plays on the lawn in the summer. There’s a historic-looking garage and former stable used to hold equipment and sometimes buffet tables for public functions.



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Some rose bushes are believed to be original to the McCrae House.

There's an old pump by the back door that would have been the home's source of water at one time. And there's an outhouse behind the storage garage.

"It looks like an old privy," Hull says. "It doesn't work, but you get the idea."

As Hull walks through the garden, she identifies the oldest plants and the abundant ones, and talks about how they would have been used in the kitchen.

There are hops, used as a yeast substitute for bread; lavender and lemon balm, used

in sachets; scarlet runner beans and sweet Cicely, used as a substitute for sugar.

There's a rose bush at the side of the house believed to be original. There's also a grapevine out back that dates back more than 100 years.

"The roots are actually on the property next door," Hull notes. "We always worry a new owner will remove it, but so far no one ever has."

There are bear's breeches, marguerites, widow's tears, lady's mantle and milkweed left to seed. There are elderberries and serviceberries and herbs by the kitchen door. And there are, of course, Flanders poppies throughout that are stunning while in bloom.

Scott says at some point in the property's history, Flanders poppies were planted along the side of the cottage, but the city had planted day lilies in the same place and

the poppies seemed to have died away.

But when the daylilies were removed to make way for the historic garden, up came the poppies again, she says. Apparently the seeds had been dormant but still viable.

"It was like a miracle," Scott says. "We were so lucky with that. We saw it as a good sign."

Wilma Honey has taken responsibility for the vegetable garden. For a time it was modelled after the historic Victory Gardens, a movement that encouraged citizens to grow fruits and vegetables to help the war effort.

But the McCrae House Victory Garden was discontinued once it was realized that although there was a tradition of growing food for the war effort during the First World War, the Victory Gardens initiative was associated with the Second World War.

Last summer they grew a variety of vegetables, including potatoes, carrots,

lettuce, peas and beans. Honey says they donate produce to the Drop in Centre and the Guelph Food Bank.

"I don't know so much about flowers, but I do know vegetables, so I've taken it on," Honey says. "I know it seems crazy to give my time to the McCrae gardens when I can barely keep up with my own, but I enjoy it. I like that I can give back to the community."

Hull says most of the McCrae gardeners feel the same way. She's involved with the Guelph Horticultural Society's garden tour and helps maintain multiple other civic gardens in the city.

"But I keep learning," she says, "and there's lots to learn."

Harrison says the garden is a representation of the time and not 100 per cent authentic to the era.

"We're not trying to reproduce a historical

garden," she says. "We're taking aspects of history and giving a nod to the time period."

Beside McCrae House is the John McCrae memorial garden, with formal paths and hedges that form the shape of a stylized poppy. It is maintained by the city.

Until the volunteer gardening program began, the city also maintained the garden immediately around McCrae House.

"They were beautiful," Harrison says, "but a historical garden was always part of the plan. We researched plants and seeds and got started. Many of our volunteers are experienced gardeners, but many volunteer so they can learn about it. The McCrae garden is constantly changing."

"It's a labour of love for our volunteers, and you can really see that in how the garden looks. They have the green thumbs, and we all benefit." 

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