

Magical makeover

Backyard was perfect when they bought the home. But that was before change came knocking





BY KATHRYN STORRING
PHOTOGRAPHY • DWIGHT STORRING

“Why do I want to go and look at a house I am not going to buy?” Ray Robertson wondered at the time.

After all, he and his wife, Michele, already lived in a leafy downtown Kitchener neighbourhood they truly loved. In fact, they had plans for an addition on their home, just a couple of blocks away from the one for sale.

But Michele’s curiosity won out. She had visited this house on a garden tour and just had to have a closer look.

And that’s when everything changed. “I fell in love with the place,” Ray recalls. “And when I saw the garden, I thought: Wow, this is spectacular.”

The broad brick patio sprawling across the home’s tasteful addition came with a handsome cabana – perfect for a large table and for entertaining. From the patio, wide steps led down to a lower level with

amazing Japanese-inspired landscaping.

Bonus, Ray thought – the garden work is all in place.

Well, that was 13 years ago, before changing conditions made bushes and trees such as forsythia, tree peonies and globe maples decide their time was up. It was before the stately walnut tree in the back corner grew so large that it could shoot its toxic tendencies across the space, challenging other plants in the original garden. And it was before the main pond sprang a leak and needed work.

And that was before each new project led to something bigger. If you have to take out a corner bush, for example, why not just build a huge stone patio for an inviting seating area?

As all gardeners know, the backyard is never finished.

Today the brick patio across the back of the house still overlooks a lower-level oasis, but Ray and Michele have added their own stamp. Michele says it’s a “fusion” of styles even as Ray jokes about designing by the

PREVIOUS PAGE: The lower level of Ray and Michele Robertson’s backyard is viewed from the stairway that leads down from the patio.

ABOVE: A roomy deck connects the main pond with a corner seating area.

FACING PAGE: A café table and chairs on the patio have a great view.



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“We’ve got to the point where we try to work with what’s around us more, rather than trying to conform it.”

MICHELE ROBERTSON

A striking stone waterfall is the focal point in the main pond, while giant rocks frame the edges.



ABOVE: Ray and Michele Robertson

TOP: A cabana defines the top patio – an ideal spot for entertaining.

RIGHT: A pathway stretches from the pond to the upper deck



seat of the pants.

On this July visit, spring blooms have mostly given way to a sea of greens thanks to plants like elephant ears, hinoki grass, ginger, Japanese painted ferns, maiden hair ferns, sedums, hostas and spurge.

Various shrubs add artful structure – weeping larch, euonymus, Japanese maples, dogwood, weeping Kwanzan cherry, oak leaf hydrangea, dwarf redwood and weeping redbud. As we discuss the shape of the latter, Michele quips that as a former hairstylist, she's pretty good at pruning. She also teases that Ray, who works in sales, is mainly "the muscle" in the backyard.

Pathways, some original and others redesigned, meander through the various beds. Giant rocks provide drama while little touches offer balance — carefully placed potted plants, eye-catching statues, lights and other ornamentation. A low boxwood hedge follows the curve of a bench. Individual boxwoods are pruned into ball shapes.

The large stone patio, added about eight years ago, forms a cosy corner "room," with its comfortable L-shaped seating and attractive fire pot. A spacious wooden deck Michele refers to as "the dock" connects the patio to the huge main pond that dominates the back corner in front of the walnut tree.

The property's original water feature, complete with a small bridge, was beautiful, but about five years ago the pond liner needed to be replaced. Ray had to dismantle everything to fix it, so he decided to make it deeper and bigger – a lot bigger. And why not add more rock at the same time? Today, substantial rocks command attention as they elevate the waterfall and outline the enlarged pond, which is dotted with water lilies.

Thinner, more precise stonework makes a striking statement at the squarish pond across the yard, at the base of the stairway that connects the yard's two levels. Ray replaced the lining for this pond with square-cut flagstone and modified the gentle waterfall. One important adjustment has been made: the pond, alive with sleek koi fish, can be covered by a screen at night to ward off stealthy herons.

Michele and Ray sprinkle good humour

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throughout their tales of landscaping adventures.

For example, Michele says an intriguing stump-like rock beside a pathway was placed there because Ray got tired while lugging it to its appointed home.

“I don’t remember where I thought that rock should go, but Ray said, ‘You know what? I can’t move that rock any more.’ And I said, ‘OK, I guess we’ll just work around it.’ She laughs and then adds: “I might not have said it like that right away...”

When asked about the size of the various rocks around the pond, Ray says, “Well, the one that smashed the end of my finger was about 350 pounds.” He chuckles as he relates the story now, but a listener is pretty sure his trademark humour was tested at the time. That injury needed 10 stitches.

Indeed, those rocks were a challenge in more ways than one. The entrance to the backyard lines up with the garage, leaving about 75 centimetres of space – in other words, no room for a handy front-end loader.

So from the driveway, all of the monster rocks had to be hauled across the patio, down the stairs and into position with the help of an appliance dolly – and various strong friends. “And I was much younger then,” Ray adds with a smile.

Did they adhere to some overall design as they worked through the projects? Ray

FACING PAGE: A side garden and pathway stretch from the pond to the upper deck and the Robertsons’ home. Pots and decorative pieces punch up the flower beds throughout the gardens.

describes it as a “free-wheeling process.” Michele gestures to a flat rock resting across the back of the fishpond, and recalls: “I said, ‘Put that stone there...’ Ray said, ‘Is that all we’re going to do?’ and I said, ‘I think so. I have to go to bed and I will look at it tomorrow morning.’” The design was set.

On the yard’s upper level, Ray built a small patio behind the garage, where a greenhouse once stood. Rock shelves, would-be steps rescued from a project at their former house, set off the back wall of the garage, holding a birdhouse and other accents. A slender concrete bench defines this area. Nearby, a café table and chairs provide a perfect perch for garden watching.

“You see all of the mistakes and all of the things to be done,” Ray says as his eyes sweep the garden below. “Like I see the vine growing up that shouldn’t be there...”

A visitor sees no problems.

Overall, both Ray and Michele are content with their surroundings; they have only smaller projects on the horizon. At least for now.

“We’ve got to the point where we try to work with what’s around us more, rather than trying to conform it,” Michele says. In one spot, for example, they shifted the walkway to go around a shrub that was overflowing its bed.

And it all just seems like home.

“To be honest,” Ray says, “I like the house, but I love the neighbourhood.”

He describes this community as having a nostalgic, 1950s feel, where friendly neighbours have eyes on the street. He and Michele have liked it from their early days in a downtown apartment.

“We would walk and dream about owning a home in this neighbourhood,” Rays says and then adds with a smile: “It was almost like on a summer night you could hear Glen Miller music playing. It was one of those types of places.”

Their magical backyard fits right in. 

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