



*Making the most
of a smaller yard*

Waterloo resident embraces townhouse challenge
after 40 years of wide-open potential



Precise designs and clever accents make the most of townhouse property

BY CAROL JANKOWSKI
PHOTOGRAPHY • TOMASZ ADAMSKI

When Fran and Dan Brown “right-sized” to a townhouse in 2014, there was no possibility they could recreate the shady forest-like trails that meandered through the much larger Waterloo property they’d called home for 40 years.

Unwilling to give up the pleasure of living with a pretty landscape, Fran gave herself most of the first year to think about their new surroundings and what she could do with a much smaller lot. To her surprise, she found it a greater challenge than a larger property where plants have room to spread.

Gradually, she saw potential not only in the 30-by-30-foot backyard, but also in their good fortune to have a small strip of land beyond the path that runs down the side of their end-unit townhouse to the main entrance. If the path was curvy and the adjacent flower bed hilly, she thought, it could serve as a pleasing welcome mat.

Fran appreciates an element of mystery in gardens, so her guiding principle for sprucing up that path was to leave visitors wondering what they’d find in the walled courtyard ahead.

There could be no tangled vines, unruly

FACING PAGE: River rocks and potted plants help define the curved walkway leading to the courtyard.

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shrubs or spreading perennials to feed the mystery. Each plant is neatly clipped and restrained in its designated spot in the flower bed. That precision is what makes the borders and beds such a pleasure to see. Without it, the care that went into selecting each plant would be lost.

The curved stone lane now is bordered by undulating flower beds anchored on one side by a garage wall, and on the other by a bed of river rocks, which in turn are outlined by a narrow band of pebbles to keep the grass from encroaching.

"I didn't want it flat," Fran explains. "I wanted highs and lows. And I didn't want to weed. I realized I needed mounds, I needed pots and I needed rocks. And of course foundation plants, which I call accessories. There's really no difference for me to work on designing a garden or an interior." The overall effect is serene. The front of

"I didn't want it flat, I wanted highs and lows. And I didn't want to weed."

FRAN BROWN

the property gets "more sun than anybody needs," so succulents, both in pots and tucked among large rocks, are important to the overall effect. Ornamental grasses of medium height bend in the breeze, softening the landscape, while here and there a single hosta with large variegated leaves provides a backdrop for smaller plants.

A clay pot holds a hibiscus whose apricot

blossoms pick up the similar colour of nearby lilies. A small, neatly clipped barberry shrub harmonizes with adjacent reed grass striped in the same dark red. Budding sedum promise fresh flowers in late summer when other plants grow weary.

Arching over the bed, as if pointing the way forward, is a trimmed, quirky-looking weeping spruce. "I never like anything too stiff or formal or contrived," Fran says of the jaunty little tree. Indeed, the trees should be happy. An arborist feeds them annually.

The path continues through a wooden gate into a courtyard where the entrance to the house is located. One wall of the courtyard is mostly glass, a triple-pane sliding door between the kitchen and the outdoors. The outside wall is grey brick. The garden that curves around the perimeter of the courtyard includes a river

birch whose bark is as papery and peeling as any mature silver birch, yet more subtle because of its orangey-brown colour.

More lilies, hibiscus, hosta, sedum and clusters of multi-coloured succulents thrive here. "I call it a small garden with a big heart," Fran says, pointing out two lengths of gnarly driftwood whitened by water and time, which the Browns picked up on northern hikes. Elsewhere, a pair of horse-shoes is tucked into soft mulch shavings. Nothing is prominently displayed.

Set back among plants or criss-crossed branches are several unadorned grey wooden birdhouses of various sizes. They're not locked in place. Like the potted plants, they are moved around at the whim of the resident gardener just as sculpture or family photos might be rearranged indoors.

Last, not least, the property has a fenced backyard, accessible through the house.

DESIGN TIPS FOR A SMALL GARDEN

Fran Brown found it surprisingly challenging to design a small garden. She offers a few tips for tackling the project:

- **Be patient.** Even if you want it done yesterday, live with the space for a while to get to know it. See where the light hits at different times of the day and in different seasons, watching how it moves over your future garden.
- **Deliberately choose simple hardscape,** such as stone, for a path or patio. If not, it will dominate people's impressions of the space



when it is plants that deserve the spotlight.

- **If possible, hire an arborist** once a year to feed and perhaps prune your trees. The Browns brought in mature trees to anchor their new garden and

want them to look their best.

- **If there are existing plants,** you may want to get rid of some or all of them to open both your mind and the garden space to new possibilities.
- **Take time to enjoy the design process:** "Every garden is a work in progress, but working on it will give you a heightened sense of well-being."





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ABOVE: Carefully placed accents, including a replica of an Easter Island statue, give the property's greenery and flowers added interest.

ABOVE RIGHT: Reed grass harmonizes with barberry shrub.

RIGHT: Fran Brown works on a section of her backyard.



This garden wraps around a large stone patio set with a table and chairs. "It needed curves, it had to be softened," Fran explains. The yard accommodates a handsome weeping larch and mature maple and magnolia trees. "I like mass gardening," Fran explains. "Plunk me in any forest and I dream."

In memory of their travels, a custom-made replica of an Easter Island statue, backed by a Siberian spruce, and a Tibetan prayer seat that she's dubbed "the wish seat" have prime positions in the garden.

Here, too, plants are staggered in height. Heuchera are planted in shade to prevent their delicate flowers from fading. Again there are rocks, including a few chunks of rugged limestone, giant ferns and a rhododendron that labours to produce a few bright red flowers each spring. Through the summer, a potted hibiscus offers its own pop of coral colour to the landscape.

A miniature variety of hosta called Gypsy Rose, with bright and dark green leaves, provides good contrast for a neighbouring saucer of multi-coloured hens and chicks.

"I want it to be calming, not busy, out here," Fran says, surveying her backyard. "No garden is care-free. Like people, it requires loving care and hard work — pruning, feeding, nurturing." 

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