



Things look different
in McCarthy's garden



Mathew McCarthy poses among his plants.
PHOTO BY CAROLYN MCLEOD

Waterloo Region Record photojournalist
Mathew McCarthy
documents on Instagram
his late-blooming affair with finding joy in the soil

PHOTOS AND STORY BY MATHEW McCARTHY

Gardening has always been part of my life, whether I wanted it to be or not. I grew up in a typical suburban neighbourhood where the street was a trim row of houses, each set back behind a rectangle of lawn. The repetition was occasionally broken by a few evergreen shrubs or an annual bed but, in the 1980s

and '90s, grass was king. Gardens were what happened on the edges.

Both my parents spent time gardening. My mother tended a connected series of beds of annuals and herbaceous perennials, keeping them tidy and full. She filled every sunny spot in the house with potted plants.

My father's interest was in a six-metre-square vegetable plot along the back fence.



This cross-section of a cabbage looks like a creature from an "Alien" movie.



This photo of an unopened hibiscus flower, bisected along its vertical axis, is the image that kickstarted @mccarthysgarden on Instagram.

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He sowed seeds and planted seedlings in arrow-straight rows separated by stretches of barn-board planks that would keep his old boots from compressing the soil as he worked.

They would spend hours with their plants. Despite their enthusiasm, however, the gardens never interested me.

My father asked me to weed occasionally, but I hated the monotony. It was just work to be done. In an attempt to show me there could literally be fruits of my labour, he suggested I take a small section of the plot for myself where I could grow whatever I wanted.

Our back-fence neighbour, whose vegetable garden was separated from ours by a chain-link fence, told me what a lucky young man I was. I looked at him as he smiled and leaned on his spade, wondering if he was mocking me. I reluctantly took on the plot and sowed a couple of rows of carrot seeds. But my father's effort was for naught. The seedlings eventually pushed through the soil, but not before I'd forgotten my promise to care for them.

It would be years before I would find any joy in the soil.

After college, I started a career in newspaper photojournalism, and over the next 25 years I worked mostly at local dailies. I produced photographs for every beat and loved the variety of the work. I still do.

I suspect my love of gardens was drip-fed to me over those years, during the many times I was invited to look for photo locations in the back gardens of interview subjects. I remember them as a collection of feelings more than the physical structure of landscape design. How a shade garden was cooler but also could feel quieter. How moving water in a small pond could pull you into a trance, like staring at a campfire. How a walled garden could be its own world.

I started to visit larger gardens on my

own and loved how the best ones could feel like an old church, as if arranging beautiful plants in a particular order made the space between them feel consecrated. Like a place where speaking was only appropriate in a whisper.

When I'd travel to a new city for work, I'd see if it had a good garden, and then try to wedge a visit into my itinerary. I began reading gardening books.

It wasn't long before I was digging borders on the small lot where my house sits. I built a raised bed in front to foil the invasive roots of a huge silver maple. Then I added another one. On the boulevard, I planted a mass of drought-tolerant plants. A small pond was dug in the backyard. Then more raised beds along the side of the house and a cold frame out back were added. For a couple of years, I rented allotment space so I could grow more vegetables.

I had become a gardener.

Gardening was hard work, creative and, most importantly, benign. My work at the newspaper was usually the same, but sometimes I'd be put in a situation where I was openly despised simply because I was from the media or because I might be photographing someone on what could be the worst day of their lives. I still do it. It's often the only real way to tell the human side of a story. But the optics of bringing a camera to a tragedy can be terrible and, as the years go by, I find I'm less interested in the sharp edges of the job.

An afternoon of solitary gardening can put everything right. The effort might not see results for weeks or months, and failure can mean waiting until the following spring to try again. But few things are as satisfying as watching a seedling grow and flower.

Photographing the garden happened sporadically while I was building it. But like the saying about the cobbler's children having no shoes: I wasn't interested in bringing my job home. Not

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See more images like this closeup of a dried out gerbera flower on Instagram @mccarthysgarden.

at first, anyway.

Then a few years ago, I planted a hibiscus that produced huge flowers. It was a shrubby plant, about a metre tall, and when in bloom it had dramatic burgundy flowers the width of my hand.

One day I noticed it had lost a few buds after a windstorm. They looked like they were a few days away from opening, the pedals wrapped in a tight spearhead shape. I picked one up and wondered what it looked like inside. With a sharp kitchen knife, I bisected it along its vertical axis. In its compact shape, it seemed less floral and more alien. It was beautiful. I immediately wanted to photograph it.

When a friend saw the photograph, he told me he hated it because he found it disturbing. That made me love it even more, and I decided to start photographing

more of my plants.

These days, when I choose a plant to photograph, I'll look at the root ball or a white fly infestation with as much interest as a bloom. To me, the neck of a striped garlic bulb or a dahlia that has sat on a compost heap can be more photogenic than a rose.

After compiling a few photographs, I started an Instagram account only for garden photos – @mccarthysgarden. To make it even more specific, I limited myself to things I could see on or from my property in Guelph. The result is a steadily growing documentation of the plants here.

That said, 10 years after digging the first spade of soil, the garden is still more a place for plants than photographs.

My parents got to see its first planting before they died, and I wonder if they were surprised by it. I had finally come around. 🌱



An ant on a peony can have a large presence when captured by Mathew McCarthy.

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