

Mickey's Garden



Cambridge property's dramatic transformation becomes lasting legacy

BY CAROL JANKOWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOMASZ ADAMSKI

The adventure began with the decision to trade their Beaches home for a house with more land for gardening. At the time, Gordon McIvor and Mickey Kular could not have imagined where they'd land, or how it would change their lives.

Since their motivation to move made a suburban property almost inevitable, the search

ABOVE: Gordon McIvor poses in the garden room.
LEFT: An inviting bench welcomes visitors to spend time in the beautiful space created by Mickey Kular.



gradually took them west, well beyond Toronto city limits. They didn't stop until, on a tip, they arrived in Cambridge.

There, waiting in a historic Galt neighbourhood, was more than they'd envisioned: a 10,000-square-foot house on just under an acre of land. Once the home of Galt's 1948-50 mayor, John (Mel) Moffatt, the property had been for sale for six years, the price gradually dropping to about half the selling price of their 1,200-square-foot Beaches house and its postage-stamp lot.

"We didn't believe in cottages," McIvor says in explaining why such a property would intrigue them. "Working all week,

The inset photo, snapped by Gordon McIvor before landscaping began, shows how much work Mickey Kular did to transform the property in the Galt section of Cambridge.



A winding path at the side of the house offers many varieties of plants to stop and admire.



TOP: The original driveway entrance became a brick path with a vine-covered archway. Vehicles now enter from the side.

BOTTOM: The water feature in the outdoor garden room.

then driving to a cottage and working all weekend, didn't interest us. Our concept was the opposite. We wanted to put all our energy into gardening at home."

They bought the Galt house and moved in 1996. "Everything needed doing, fixing, but it was big, and offered so much opportunity for gardening," McIvor says.

Today its lush gardens make it difficult to see the house from the street, but in those days the neo-Tudor house was in full view. As McIvor describes its move-in appearance, "there were three trees and not one flower."

Two days after he and Kular moved in, there was a knock at the front door. A passerby wanted to tell them how attractive the living room looked from the street. The men were still unpacking, but the intrusion, however well-intended, made them realize they wanted more privacy. Landscaping would be the priority.

First to be created was a garden room where they could relax out of sight of passersby. As a backdrop, a substantial earth berm was established along one side of the property. Stone walls were built, and within the room a metre-deep pond was dug, lined with stone and populated with dozens of 19-cent feeder fish.

All these years later, the pond hosts about 75 sleek goldfish, all descendants of the original occupants; there was never a need to restock. The fish hide under a rock ledge, slumbering through winters at the base of the pond.

A curving vine-covered path leads through the gardens to the secret room that features subtle lighting, statuary, comfortable seating and plants that seem to embrace the people relaxing there. They've

used the room as a venue for entertaining friends as well as staging fundraisers, but although they agreed to include it on some community garden tours, they always turn down strangers' requests to use the property as a backdrop for photos.

In another bid for privacy, vines were planted to soften the look of the garages, and the original wide, utilitarian driveway was replaced with a narrower stone road that winds toward the garages and what is now the primary access to the house.

The men were pleasantly surprised by the quality of independent garden centres they found in this area compared to Toronto's limited selection. Hortico Nursery in Waterdown became a regular destination because they liked its ease of ordering unusual plants. Hortico caters to gardeners who research plants in advance and know

exactly what they want for a specific spot in a garden. Kular and McIvor would look up the desired plant in the nursery's online stock list before driving there. "Then we'd give them a code, they'd go in the back and come out with one or two perfect specimens."

When it came to designing the flower beds and choosing plants, "I was the sous chef, Mickey was the chef," McIvor says. "He liked rare plants — hosta, lilies, a fragrant gas plant, orchids." Now that their landscape has matured, he believes it is at its best in late May to early June.

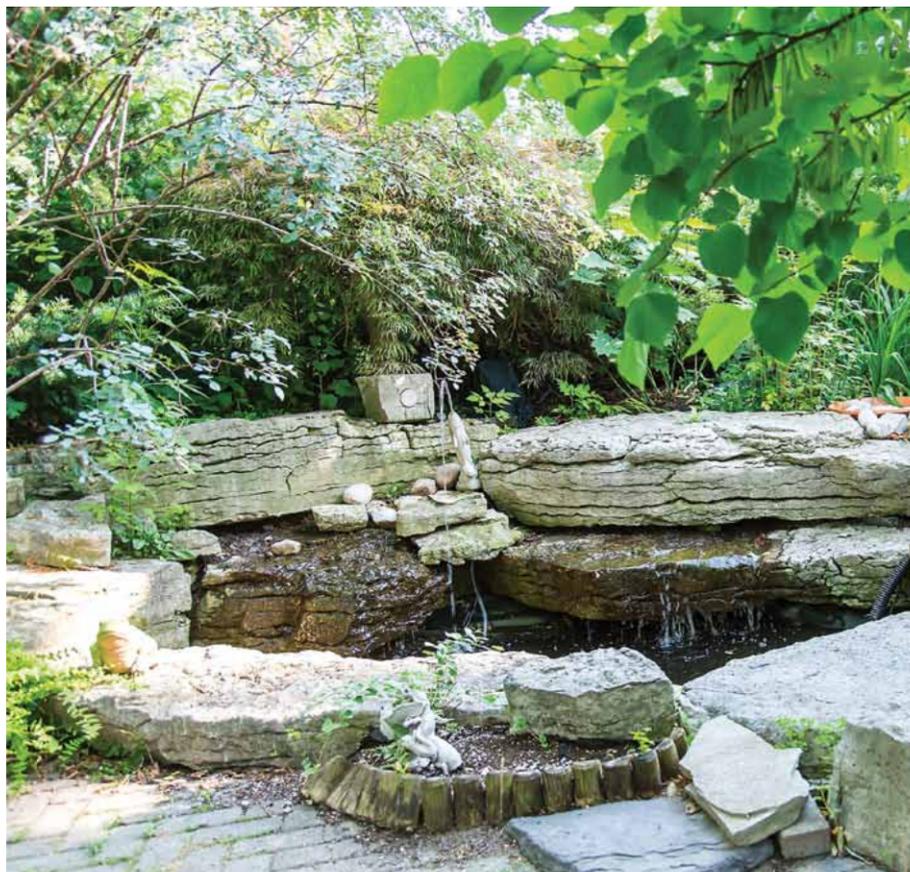
M cIvor is now retired, but for most of their years in Galt, he was a real estate executive and travelled frequently. Kular, who studied hotel management in his native Kenya and elsewhere,

was employed at the former Waterloo Inn and Conference Centre.

Kular died of a stroke in mid-2017 at the age of 57, after several years of declining health. To honour his memory and their life together, McIvor, now 64, devotes an hour every day from early spring to late fall maintaining the pristine exterior of their home. He's the man who clips the portulaca encircling tree trunks, precisely edges the circular flower beds, prevents shrubs from overgrowing their allotted space and keeps an eye on the health of their carefully chosen trees, some of which are planted in groups of three; others stand alone.

With that same discipline, he swims for an hour a day in the indoor pool and makes a point of sitting in the garden every day for the sheer pleasure of it.

Kular loved gardens, not necessarily



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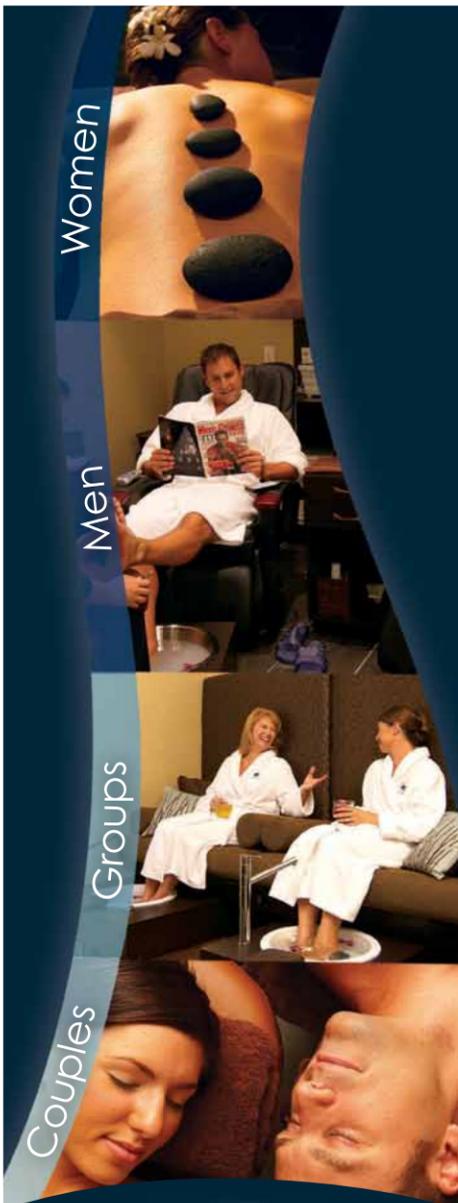
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gardening. But as with all his passions, he took it seriously. He devoured books on plant attributes and their care, starting with an award-winning series of horticulture books by Elizabeth Hole, who went on to serve as Alberta's 15th lieutenant governor from 2000 until 2005. Over more than 20 years, Kular amassed a library of more than 200 horticulture books.

Reflecting on the partner he met in the early 1990s, McIvor concluded "Mickey was a remarkably talented man, the smartest man I ever knew in my life."

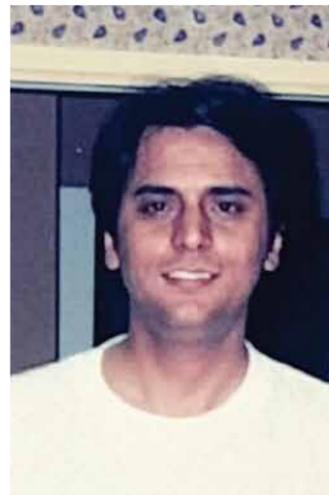
What he calls Kular's "natural talent for decorating" is evident both outdoors and in their seven-bedroom house where the rich reds and golds of Kular's Sikh heritage appear in silky window and bed coverings, all of which Kular designed and stitched himself. Combined with dozens of paintings and framed prints hung throughout the house, the effect should be overpowering, but instead it conveys warmth and elegance.

They upgraded and updated the interior of the house, reorganizing space, knocking down walls between small rooms, adding an inviting rooftop patio.

The walls of a large kitchen are lined with dozens of wood cabinets in various sizes, all painted by Kular in the blues and golds of Provence. A large adjacent sunroom looking out to the gardens features a circular water fountain on which delicate nymphs, each with a tiny light, add sparkle to dark nights. Outside, birds flutter back and forth to a feeder.

"The Christmas decor was extraordinary ... we had six Christmas trees," McIvor says.

He has vivid memories of the busy early years when they were developing their gardens. One of their



Mickey Kular died of a stroke in 2017 at the age of 57. Gordon McIvor spends time each day in the garden, honouring the memory of a man who learned everything he could about horticulture.

favourite trees, a forest pansy redbud, was moved four times before Kular found just the spot where it could thrive. Kular's pride and joy was a tall, spreading blanc double de coubert shrub rose that produces two- to three-inch white flowers and is wonderfully fragrant in spring.

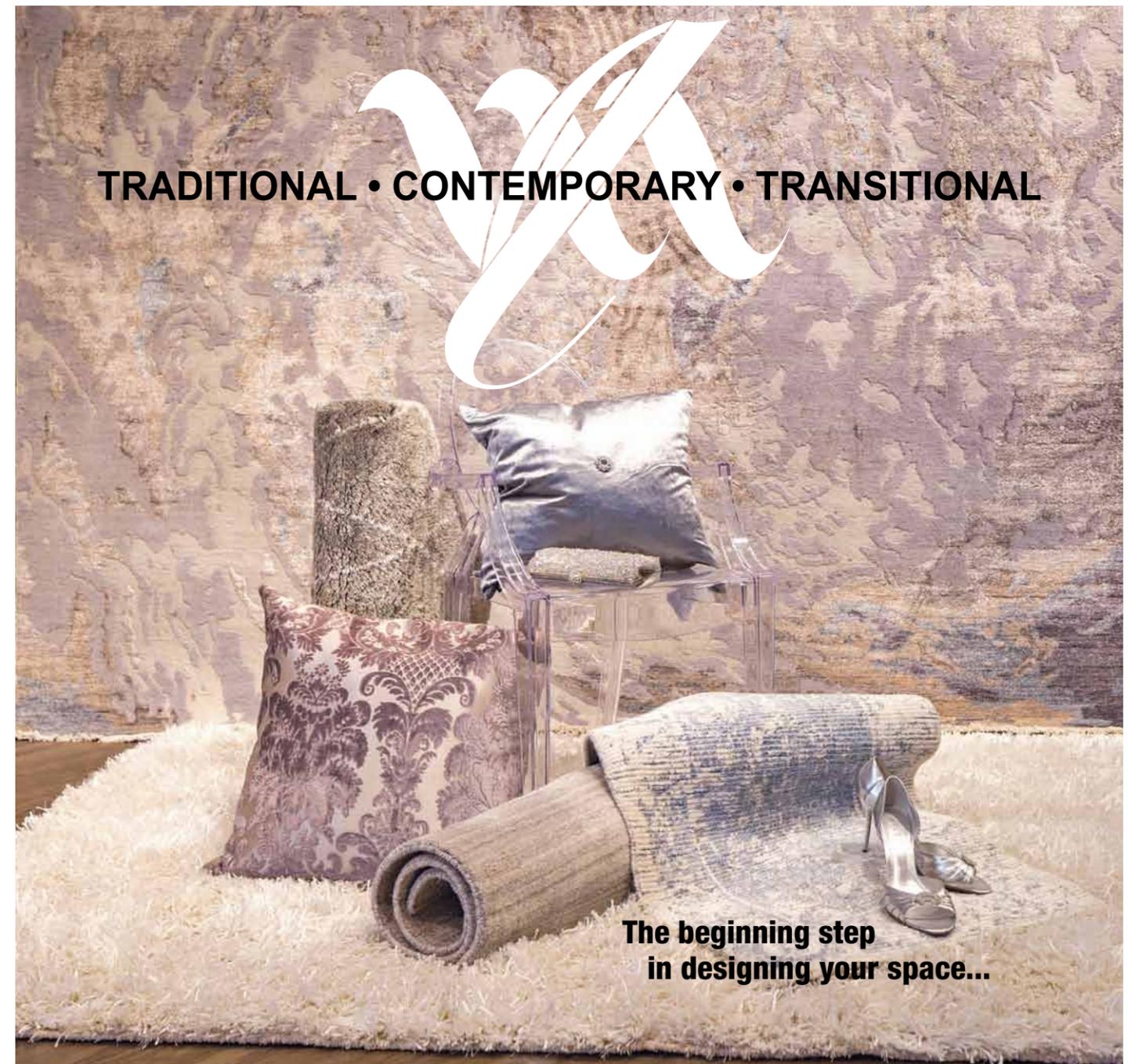
He sometimes relied on instinct when introducing new plants to the property, McIvor says. "People would say, 'You can't do this,' but he would — and he could."

Neighbours sought Kular's advice on what might be ailing their plants. Following his death, they frequently commented to McIvor that Kular had taught them so much.

He kept "many different notebooks with what he was planting and where," McIvor says. "He was always moving things around to find more sandy or more clay soil for it. He had such a respect and connection with nature. He'd see faces in daffodils.

"He changed me. I loved fall, but he gave me a love for spring when things are coming alive."

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