



A friendship made in the garden

With a shared passion and appreciation for each other's unique styles, two neighbours in Kitchener's Forest Hill area grew into friends

BY KATHRYN STORRING

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TARA WEST

T rue friendship is like a perfect garden — deeply rooted, constantly in bloom and a source of both serenity and smiles. So it stands to reason that if a friendship blossoms because of a garden, it just might take off like a native species.

Take the case of Sandi Loreen Duclos and Carol Kay, who live across a park from each other in Kitchener's Forest Hill neighbourhood. Duclos started admiring Kay's front garden during regular walks/runs not long after moving to her home in 2003.

"One day she was out in her garden, so I stopped and spoke to her," Duclos says. "We have not looked back. It started as a mutual love of gardening and it's grown into a friendship that is really indescribable."

"There's just sort of a magnetism, whatever it is, between us," Kay agrees, then adds with a laugh: "Although we don't always agree. We can totally have disagreements."

Duclos takes special note of the laughter that ripples through this conversation on Kay's deck last July. Duclos says she tends to take life seriously, especially when on the job as an interior designer, but that changes when she is with Kay. Kay, long retired from a job at Seneca College, ignites a lighter side, her relaxed and social personality inviting easy conversation.

When Kay thinks about their early connections, she remembers asking Duclos if she wanted to go on an upcoming horticultural society tour. That's when they really discovered they were "joined at the hip."

Still, it's a safe bet the women could not have imagined the years ahead — the innumerable garden tours they would enjoy,



often accompanied by their husbands, Bryan Kay and Dennis Duclos, and the countless garden tours they would host on their own captivating properties.

"At that time, I was a perfectionist," Duclos recalls. "I never felt my garden was good enough. I had this fear people would ask me what flowers they were and I would never know and I would look so stupid. I've gotten over that stuff."

And it's just as well. Last summer, the two properties hosted tours ranging from the

local horticultural societies to the Toronto Master Gardeners.

For several years, Kay and Duclos even prowled local streets — "partners in crime," Duclos says — looking for candidates for Kitchener Horticultural Society tours. They loved these sleuthing expeditions, despite the huge time commitment of working through the logistics with homeowners. Over the years, they only had one "no" that could not be renegotiated. Along the way, they gained many good friends.

ABOVE: Carol Kay, left, and Sandi Loreen Duclos relax on the back deck at Kay's house.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A bench in the front yard is one of many inviting places to escape in Sandi Loreen Duclos' gardens.



“Gardening is a common thread that just brings out the best in everybody,” Duclos says. “We can all be having the worst day and you get in the garden or talk to other gardeners and, all of a sudden, it’s all about good things.”

The women are also fascinated by how gardens take on the owners’ personalities.

“It can be the same plants in two gardens,” Kay points out, “but it’s the way it’s put together and staged.”

This is true of Kay and Duclos’ gardens, too, where there are many shared plants, such as clematis, roses, hydrangeas and hostas, but very different presentations.

“Carol and I are like Frick and Frack. We are complete opposites,” Duclos notes. “She knows the name of every plant out there whereas I know hardly any of the names. I am all about the esthetics of the garden — how they are laid out, that kind of thing.

Carol is more about the names, the type of material, different material, the botanical names, all of that stuff. . . . But she also has a love affair with art and unusual things.”

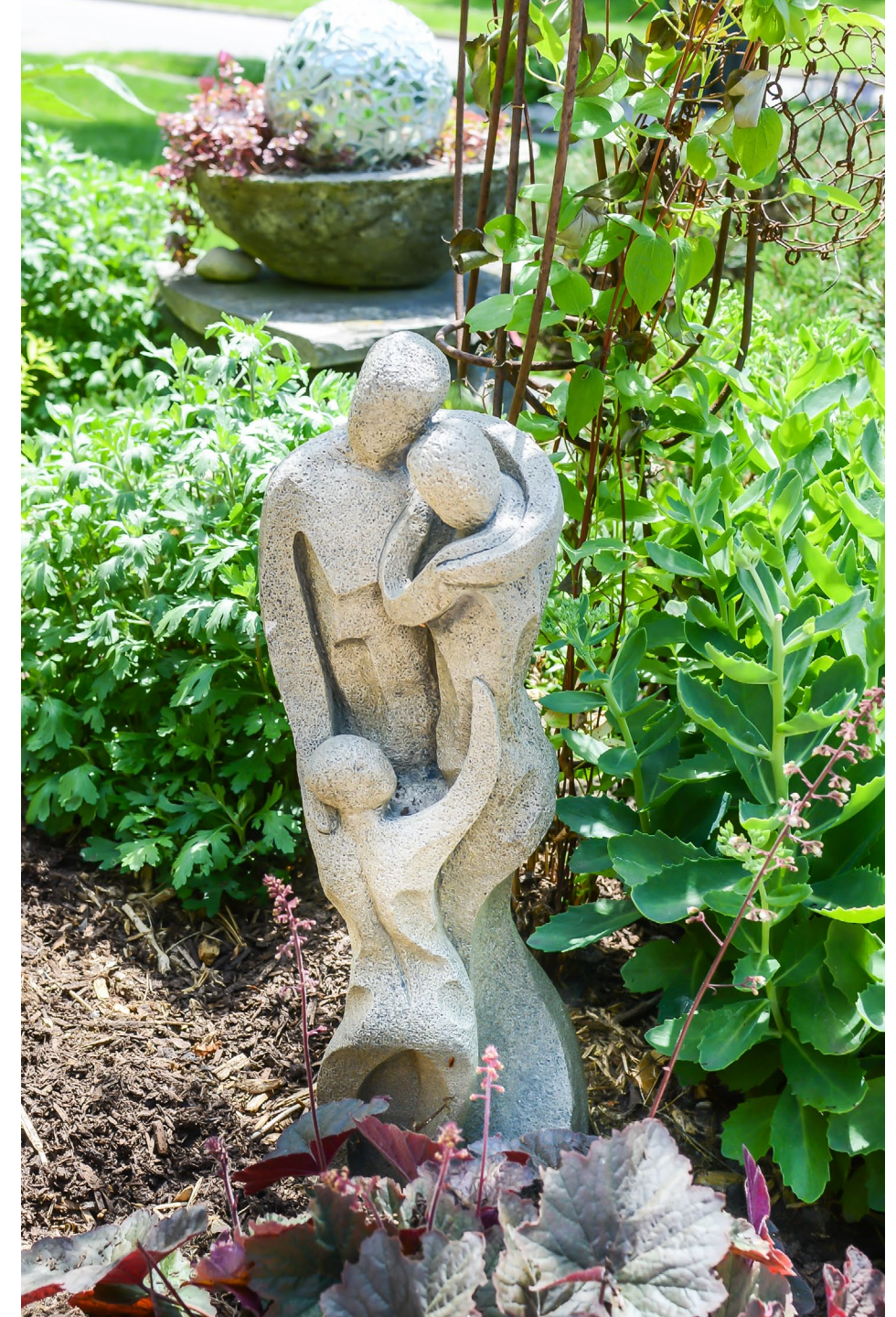
Summing up their process, Duclos says, “Neither one of us really takes our garden too seriously. We try to have fun with it.”

“If it works, it works,” adds Kay. “If it doesn’t, well, you try something else.”

And you might even believe these cavalier assessments if you haven’t toured their gardens.

Carol’s garden

You have to be invited into Carol Kay’s backyard to appreciate her artful side. At the front, flower beds are manicured, even formal. But that’s just my impression. When I ask her to label her style during a summer visit, I am met by a bemused smile and a shake of the head. “The garden is just me,” Kay says. “I just work at it and kind of do my own



thing.”

Her tasteful displays start on the broad boulevard where periwinkle snakes along the curb and hostas, heuchera (coral bells) and “Angelina” sedum line the sidewalk.

Threads of colour direct the eye along the driveway, thanks to alyssum, roses, daylilies, St. John’s wort, campanula, black-eyed Susans and coreopsis, all perfectly

stationed to highlight the hostas, heucheras, prickly pear cactus and rocks large and small. Closer to the house, giant clumps of grass stand tall in a Japanese-style bed set off by stones, blood grass, zebra grass, lavender, speedwell and euphorbia.

As I admire the various combos, Kay takes stock of possible revisions. The white iris, for one, is on her “maybe” list — just not as

FACING PAGE: The “streetscape” fencing and sculpture is a standout feature in the backyard.

ABOVE: One of many sculptures in Carol Kay’s front yard.

A vibrant garden scene featuring a large, leafy tree in the background. In the foreground, a stone lantern sits on a paved path made of irregular stones. To the left of the lantern is a large, dense green shrub. To the right, there are tall, thin grasses and clusters of purple and white flowers. A blue irrigation pipe runs along the edge of the path. In the upper right corner, a portion of a house with light-colored siding and a blue door is visible.

*In Carol Kay's yard,
a dizzying profusion of plants
and shrubs pull the eye in
a thousand directions at once.*



Carol Kay's son, Kevin Orr, is a welder with an artistic flair. He has added many special elements to his mother's garden.

attractive as its nearby cousin, which has a soft ivory bloom with a dusty mauve top. The verberna bonariensis needs to be reined in, despite the promising blossoms just starting to push through its purple heads. "It's a plant that butterflies like so I just let it go," Kay notes. "Now there's a clump up here and even in the sidewalk. I'm now having to take it out ..."

It's not that she is particularly annoyed; to-do lists engage her creative side during her regular walks around the property, which she and Bryan have owned for almost two decades.

"There is always something that you want to change," she says. "Whether you have seen something in somebody's garden or (a plant) is not performing the way you like or

it's getting overgrown — whatever. There is always something to do."

There may well be things to do, but a visitor would say there's lots she's already done. And the front garden is nothing compared to what's to come.

Follow Kay along the end of the house and you enter the upper level of an expansive backyard. There's a large deck to your right, but it's the substantial downward slope and lower garden that pull the eye in a thousand directions at once.

A dizzying profusion of plants and shrubs unfold, and Kay rhymes them off with ease, everything from varieties of lilies, roses, phlox and ferns to more unusual specimens such as painter's palette, darmera, a lime-green smokebush, penstemon digitalis "Husker Red" and many more.

The progress of two peonies, a new variety called Itoh, speaks volumes about a gardener's world. The one at the top of a set of stairs was a spring delight with its giant blooms. "It was loaded," Kay says. "And we had it for about two days and then we got the rain and the hail, and boom! Gone."

Meanwhile, the second one is doing battle with the baptisia by a fence. "The baptisia has grown so big this year, I am going to have to move one or the other." (Another item for that to-do list.)

While touring the lower level, Kay laughs when asked how she designs her flower beds or places her various statues and other accents. "I think: I really like that. Now where can I put it? I don't plan that far ahead."

The results are anything but haphazard in a 25-metre-wide property that has lots of room for artful play. Her son, Kevin Orr, a welder by trade, has contributed a striking art piece made of stained glass and metal. A clematis skips across an old metal bed frame to climb a large ornamental flower. A gently arched bridge leads to a rustic seating area. A mirror hangs nearby. Short, upright sections of logs form one of three stairways marching up the hill.

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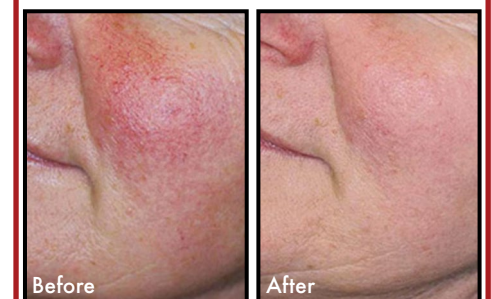
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A mermaid figurine watches over a pond feature in Carol Kay's backyard.

Kay is an expert at “the find.” Some found items come from friends and some are from her own property, such as the repurposed slabs from a former patio. Others come from further afield, such as the pieces of decorative aluminum hauled back from New Zealand. A garage sale yielded a stack of colourful glass panels from old cupboards. They now hang along the upper deck.

And then there are the intriguing “fence” panels at the base of the property — conveniently hiding the neighbours’ shed. She found the boards at a garage sale and installed them to look like a whimsical streetscape, complete with fake windows. Old doors extend the effect.

But her garden has drama as well as whimsy, especially in the terraced section. Along one side, a narrow stream tumbles over stones, leading from a small lily pond on the upper level to an impressive pond at the bottom.

The pond was part of Kay’s first major project. She and Bryan borrowed a flatbed truck and brought in rock from a quarry. That sounds simple enough until you take in what they accomplished. There are a number of flat rocks on the upper walkway, the steps down to the lower garden, plus various pond and accent rocks.

And then there’s the other rock project

— 14 large, slab-like stones Bryan and a neighbour placed along the base of the garden’s slope during the 2016 heat wave. The mind boggles at the effort involved in manoeuvring these monsters down the slope on a dolly provided by the stone company.

I climb back to the upper level, ready to settle into a deck chair, but the property’s surprises are not over. In fact, one awaits on the deck itself — an unusual table surrounded by colourful bar stools. In its former life, the table was a maple tree. The deck had been built around it, an interesting conversation piece until the Kays tired of its sap and messiness. They had it cut down, leaving a tall stump as a clever table. Kevin Orr added a footrail.

Another of Orr’s art pieces commands attention in the small garden at the end of the deck. For this one, Orr designed tall decorative bases to hold the twisty glass sculptures Kay brought back from Texas.

The mere thought of keeping this large property tour-ready makes me long for a nap in the shade, but that’s not how Kay sees it.

“People say to me, ‘Oh, how can you keep up? When are you going to give up this garden?’ ” Kay says. “And I say, ‘Not until I do a face plant and I’m gone.’ That’s it.

“To me, it’s not work.”



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Sandi's garden

There's absolutely no question garden aficionados live at Sandi and Dennis Duclos' home. Even their Pomeranian pooches answer to garden names, Lily and Lilac. And their property exudes English cottage perfection from the street view right through to the back corner.

Sandi Duclos says she prefers old-fashioned plants, but the impact is anything but ordinary. Duclos carefully stage-manages her lush, full gardens, so that a succession of plants takes starring roles from spring until late summer.

First come the spring bulbs (with more to come) and allium. Next the peonies. Then it's on to the roses, followed by the clematis, then the hydrangea. Phlox closes the show, starting in late July.

But although these plants are the headliners, there are lots of understudies and minor characters eager to divert the spotlight as needed.

I arrived just as the front yard's sea of Annabelle hydrangea was coming to life. Duclos has no idea how many hydrangeas she has and it's impossible to count within

the mass display. Suffice to say there are a lot. Their plump blooms frame the welcoming front porch with its decorative accents and pretty curtains. Three tall, angular birdhouses poke out of the nearby window box.

Beyond the hydrangeas, a variety of plants add punches of colour and texture — ballerina rose, hostas, lavender, phlox, perennial geranium, David Austin roses, boxwood and clematis, including one draped over the curved lines of the picket fence that stretches across the front of the property.

"The garden is not meant to be perfect looking," Duclos notes. "I call it methodically messy. There is a method to my madness."

Follow her to the backyard through a clever gateway featuring an old-fashioned door and the "method" reveals itself in a carefully tended, peaceful oasis, complete with butterflies and bird choirs.

Every structure, every garden bed exudes Duclos' flair for tasteful design. An inviting seating area houses a bench swing, a particular delight to a grandchild.



THIS PAGE: Sandi Loreen Duclos' front garden is a sea of colour at full bloom. A stationary pooch guards the front porch.

FACING PAGE: The white picket fence matches the hydrangeas behind it.



*“My garden is my
sanctuary where
I just love to go and get
away from the rest of
the world.”*

SANDI LOREEN DUCLOS



"We literally live in the backyard in the summer," Sandi Loreen Duclos says.

A "pondless pond" features a waterfall and rocks without deep water. Carefully placed vintage accents and birdhouses pop up here and there.

Whereas Kay's property sloped downward, this one climbs up from three decks and a windy grass pathway, adding coveted height appeal to the mass plantings. Three stairways invite a curious visitor upwards. Cedars add privacy along the back and sides.

"In the winter, I live in a humble home," Duclos says as she scans the property from one of the decks. "In the summer, I live in a mansion. We literally live in the backyard in the summer."

There are statement plants in various varieties, including foxglove, clematis, tree peony and regular peonies, roses, phlox and hydrangea, plus many more — delphiniums, coneflowers, Shasta daisies and perennial geraniums. A William Baffin rose puts on a stunning show as it climbs the pergola. It's hard to believe Duclos' assurance that it is easy-care. She has similar praise for a lacy-centred hydrangea appropriately named Tuff Stuff.

A hidden, contemplative space at one end

of the house is dedicated to her mother, who died of cancer. An angel statue reminds Duclos that her mother's love was "abundant and nurturing, but at the same time modest and unassuming." This flower bed includes a few plants divided from her mother's garden — peonies, iris and phlox — as well as flowers that evoke memories of things she loved. Clematis, for example, in tones of blue, white and mauve, like the uniforms of the Toronto Blue Jays and Toronto Maple Leafs.

The backyard's three large decks fan out from the house as stylish "rooms" — dining/entertaining, spa and sun deck. In fact, this is where the backyard design started — the day the Ducloses moved in in 2003.

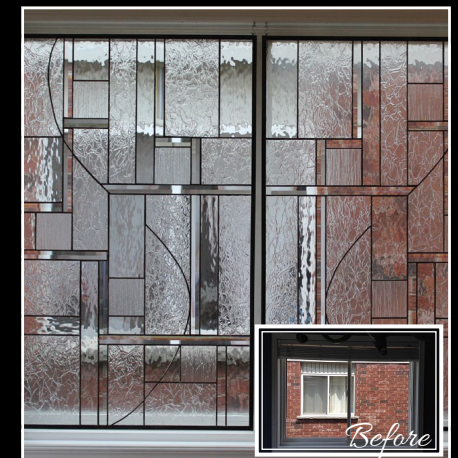
A construction crew tore down the old deck and built the new structures following Duclos' instructions. Meanwhile, landscapers dug out periwinkle and grass and brought in 45 metres of topsoil and edging rock. They also built the three stairways up the yard's slope.

Eager to get her hands into the soil, Duclos set to work on the central garden on the lower level, anchored by an ash tree



KARA'S GLASS

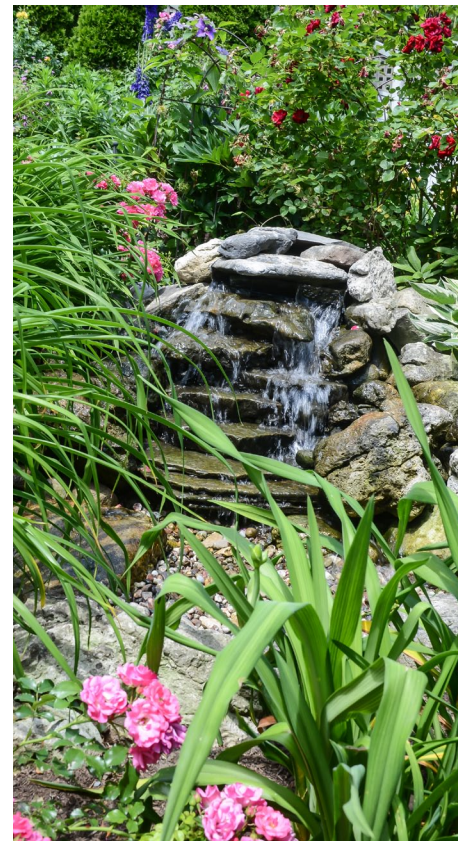
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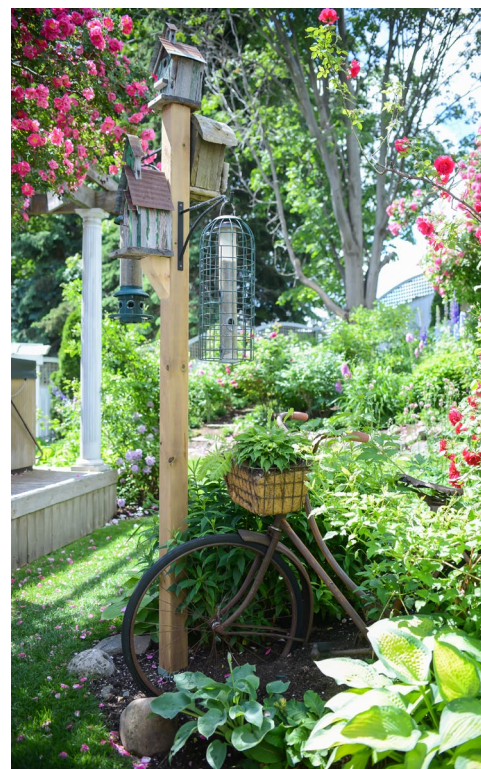
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Among the features found in Sandi Loreen Duclos' backyard are, clockwise from bottom left, an old bicycle as an object of art, a lounging deck and a "pondless pond" — a waterfall and rocks without deep water.



with an old bicycle propped against it. In the years since, she and Dennis decided the ash was too messy, so they cut it down, leaving a tall stump to hold birdhouses and feeders. But when the stump rotted, it had to go too. Now only the old bike remains, embedded in the ground as a determined art object.

This garden has now been expanded to include the pond.

Another transition was in the works in 2017 when Sandi and Dennis planted boxwood hedges to outline the base of the slope and the edges of the staircases, adding a dash of formality that will become more prominent in the years to come. The backyard had already been through a transition, a shady garden recovering beautifully in the sunshine after the last of three Manitoba maples was taken down.

Those changes were behind her on this July day in 2017 as Duclos toured me around.

She says she usually takes a walk through the property after work, pulling weeds and checking the progress. Despite the compliments that roll in thanks to garden tours, she still sees work to be done.

"I don't look at my garden as being spectacular in any sense of the word," Duclos says. "My garden is my sanctuary where I just love to go and get away from the rest of the world. And I see its imperfections every single day."

But she takes it all in stride. For example, she says she tries to keep watering to a minimum unless a garden tour is headed her way. Usually she and Dennis "like to do all of our work in the spring and sit back the rest of the summer and just enjoy it."

Bring Duclos and Kay together and the conversation strays from gardens to shared experiences to more philosophical topics.

"You never know where friendships are going to come from," Kay notes.

Duclos talks about losing her parents and says, "I believe in higher beings, and I guess if I really wanted to get deep and personal, I would probably think that the universe brought Carol to me because it knew that through everything I went through, I would need somebody's support. Carol and Bryan have been there for us every step of the way."

"We can talk about just about everything," Kay adds. "Our friendship has been going on for a long time. We've seen a lot of things happen in each other's lives."


Kay says it's important to embrace life each day and enjoy family and friends. Duclos says gardening is part of that life lesson.

"Every September or October, we have to put our gardens to rest and you never know whether they are going to come back again. And that's very much like the humans, right? That they can be gone, just like that, and you'll never see them again."

The friends marvel at the life stories shared in a garden. On more than one occasion, they have been told gardening is like therapy.

"Maybe your first impression would be, 'Oh, that person does not look very happy.' But if you bring them into a garden environment, oftentimes their personality changes," Kay says.

The pair encourages others to join local horticultural societies and garden clubs, a reasonably priced way to learn — and to find — garden therapy.

"There is a whole different aspect to the world when you actually open your hearts to people," Duclos says. "And the best way to open your heart to people is through your garden. That's what we've discovered." 

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