



Dual Personality

A Sudbury gardener cultivates both creativity
and blooms in her carefree landscape

BY SANDRA MACGREGOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY DONNA GRIFFITH

A centrepiece of Barbara and Bryan Grace's summer entertaining, the pool is also a favourite of their granddaughter Karly (pictured here, left, with friend Kelsey), a frequent visitor.



L Barbara Grace has a secret. As an interior decorator, she is often required to follow strict design formulas and create muted, pristine indoor schemes for many of her clients. But while this formal, subdued style may be her calling card in business, it's a wild card that rules Barbara's personal design style, which she shows off to full effect in her Sudbury, Ontario, garden.

The property was nothing more than a large, barren lot when Barbara and her husband, Bryan,

purchased the land in 1979 and quickly went about building a home and creating a modest garden. However, in 1993, unhappy with her patch, Barbara decided to start over: "I wanted an English-country-style garden, yet something free-flowing, not formal," she says.

She realized her dream. For the past 15 years, Barbara has enjoyed a landscape rich with informal, lush beds in a kaleidoscope of colours, punctuated by playful touches and whimsical vignettes.



At-a-glance

GARDENERS Barbara and Bryan Grace; daughter, Dawn-Marie
LOCATION Sudbury, Ontario **OCCUPATION** Barbara, interior decorator; Bryan, retired **LOT SIZE** 21 x 53 metres **ORIENTATION** southeast **CONDITIONS** good soil, mostly sunny, many mature cedars **GROWING SEASON** late April to mid-October **GARDEN FOCUS** perennials and annuals in hot colours; swimming pool; artistic, whimsical touches **ZONE** 4b

FREE-THINKING

Approach the Graces' home from the front and you're greeted by a deceptively staid, manicured yard—a nod to Barbara's restrained businesswoman persona. But peek past the stately cedars toward the gated backyard and you're welcomed by an ebullient display of gardening at its most riotous.

Push open the gate and you discover Barbara's favourite part of the garden, a shady area filled with a variety of mosses, woolly thyme and periwinkle (pictured right). "I love this spot because it's the first thing visitors see, and coming from the front, it's so unexpected," she enthuses. Here, you also immediately get a taste of her love of whimsy: an empty birdcage hangs from an oak (one of the few non-cedars in the garden) and a charming wooden bench completes the scene.

With a garden that's as much about hardscaping as it is about plants, it helps to have a handy husband. Bryan built the bench, as well as the shed, sauna room, deck—in fact, pretty much everything that isn't growing.

The petunias (visible on left side of photo) disguise a large deck leading off the back of the house. It's perfect for entertaining—one of Barbara and Bryan's favourite pastimes.





NATURALLY NURTURING

Throughout the garden, swaths of lush beds overflowing with phlox, daylilies, sedums, bee balm and cosmos play homage to Barbara's philosophy of "follow no formulas," while decorative vignettes greet every glance. "I want my garden to look like things happened naturally; like birds flew over and dropped seeds into the yard," explains Barbara. But she's equally adamant her easygoing approach doesn't mean her yard is unkempt: "It's not manicured, but it's well groomed, never shabby," she insists. And while the decorative touches are abundant, the landscape is not cluttered. Exuberance never spills over into chaos.

Despite her repudiation of rules, there is one maxim Barbara does subscribe to: gardening must never be a chore. Though she will reluctantly admit early spring can be somewhat taxing, for the most part, tending the garden is a form of pure relaxation. "It's exercise and enjoyment—a labour of love."

Notwithstanding the healthy abundance of blooms, which includes plenty of her favourites—poppies, Asiatic lilies and zinnias (unknown cultivar, above)—Barbara is quick to point out she is not a horticultural heavyweight. "I don't know botanical

names, or what plants will work until I try them." And her basic approach to plant care is to grow specimens so closely together that weeds don't have a chance. Before winter, aside from adding a layer of straw to protect her golden clematis (*Clematis tangutica*) and her lilies, Barbara does nothing else. Not surprisingly, she favours low maintenance plants, and if a specimen can't make it on its own, it's gone. Says Barbara: "I once had a Japanese maple, but it became too much work, so out it went!"





DIVE IN

Where Barbara does tolerate high maintenance, however, is with her swimming pool (which Bryan—opposite with granddaughter Karly—installed with the help of friends). In another testament to Barbara's love of the informal, naturally derived look, the diving platform is made entirely of boulders and flat limestone.

Huge, mature cedar hedges (there are more than 20 on the property—Barbara says they grow well in her chilly climate) edge the pool and the northeast side of the garden and ensure privacy.

Even for her garden's utilitarian structures, such as the storage shed (top right) at the northeast corner of the pool and sauna (opposite) at the southeast end, Barbara never lets practicality trump playfulness. Decked out in black-eyed Susans (above) and white, orange and pink annuals such as impatiens and bacopa (far right), petunias and verbena, the sauna provides a floriferous feast for the eyes. The storage shed has unique touches that take it beyond the ordinary as well: the crowd-pleaser being the faux fireplace mantel adorning its front facade.





Karly lends a helping hand while Kahlua, a miniature collie, takes Barbara's more relaxed approach to gardening.



DESIGN DIVA

Though Barbara may bid adieu to business in her garden, there's one aspect of her job that comes through in her landscape—her design flair. The hardscaping and design touches throughout attest to the interior decorator's ability to cleverly transform everyday objects into unexpected, singular statements, such as the "living" chandelier (opposite, bottom left), draped with creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia*); the twig bookshelf (opposite, top right) complete with wooden tomes made by Bryan; and the potting-glove display (above).

Top plants for poolsides

These plants can tolerate the chlorine found around most pools.

YARROW (*Achillea* cvs.) **ZONE 2**

SIBERIAN PEASHRUB (*Caragana arborescens* cvs.) **ZONE 2**

PURPLE CONEFLOWER (*Echinacea purpurea*) **ZONE 3**

HOSTA (*Hosta* cvs.) **ZONE 2**

JUNIPER (*Juniperus* cvs.) **ZONE 2**

MAIDEN GRASS (*Miscanthus sinensis* cvs.) **ZONE 4**

CATMINT (*Nepeta* spp.) **ZONE 3**

RUSSIAN SAGE (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*) **ZONE 4**

MOSS ROSE (*Portulaca grandiflora*) **ANNUAL**

SAGE (*Salvia* cvs.) **ZONE 3**

— Anne Marie Van Nest

Design tips

- First and foremost, “Don’t let your garden own you,” advises interior decorator Barbara Grace. “Gardening has to be something you love, something you can’t wait to get home to.”
- Choose decorative objects that don’t look as if they came directly from a store. “The more character marks, the better,” says Barbara, who acquires most of her pieces from garage sales, flea markets and even roadsides.
- Don’t be afraid of colour. Try some hits of juicy citrus shades—you might be surprised at how bold hues will breathe life into your landscape.
- Accept your garden’s limitations. “If a plant wants to die, it will die,” she counsels. “Be at ease with your [growing] zone.”



THE BOLD AND THE BEAUTIFUL

A common theme in both Barbara’s decorative vignettes and plant selections is the use of bright colours. “I’ve always been in love with bold colour,” says Barbara, who confesses lavender, decidedly too muted, is her least favourite shade. Blue, also lacking in boldness, is another no-no.

There’s a practical reason as well for choosing hot hues, she explains. With such a long property, bold colours are visible from anywhere in the yard. ■