

# free hand

At Ontario's Ste. Anne's Country Inn and Spa, the border plantings are as relaxed as the guests

BY SANDRA MACGREGOR

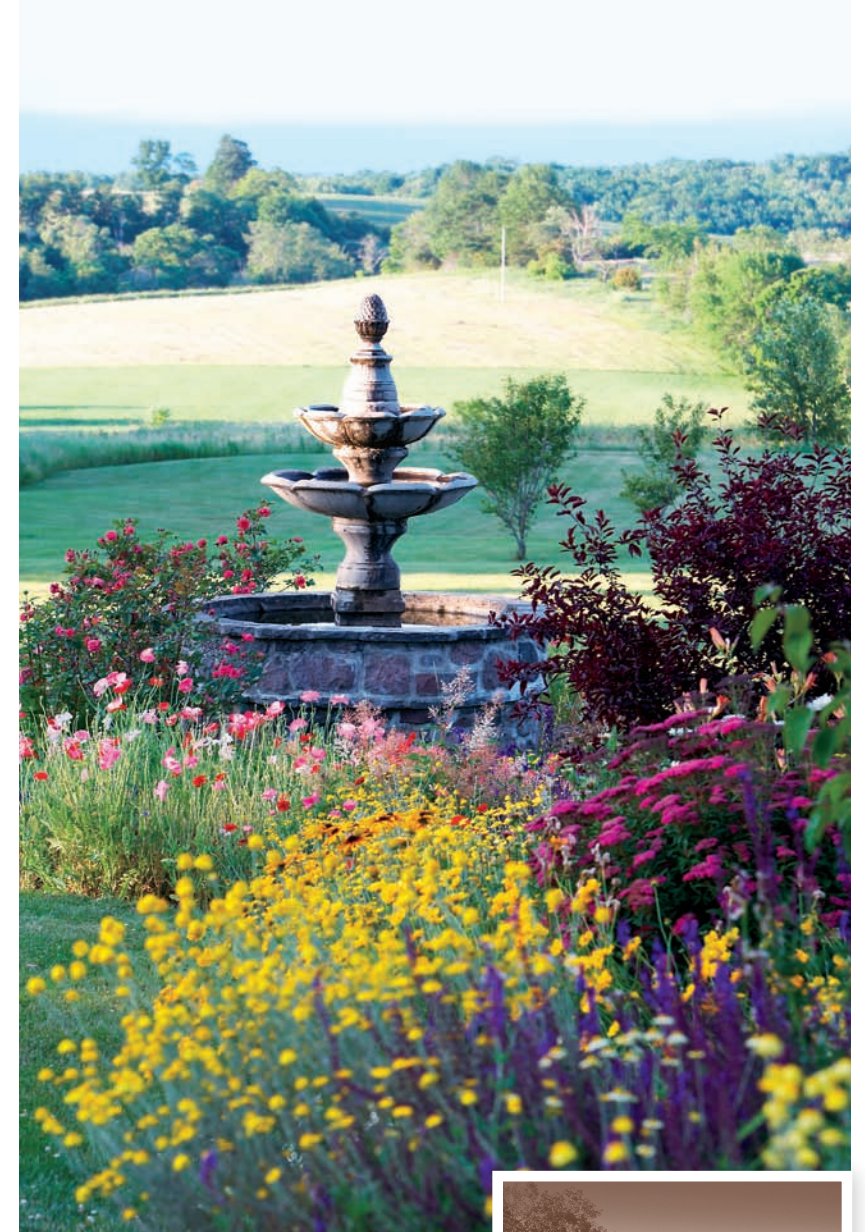


A laid-back approach to a pathway means a cheery burst of colour greets the inn's guests.

IT'S A DIRTY little secret: Though many a gardener is willing to painstakingly nurture a reticent seedling into a show-stopping star, sometimes even the most patient of green thumbs just wants a quick fix—to go from bud to bloom in record time, with minimal effort.

Debbie Turk and Darlene O'Connor, gardeners at Ste. Anne's Country Inn and Spa, the luxury retreat in Grafton, Ontario, are no different. With the demands of five acres to tend to, their goal is to create beautiful gardens that are as laid-back as they are lavish; the two just don't have the time for high-maintenance plant divas. That ease-inspired design philosophy is most evident in the border they created leading from the inn to the outdoor pool, where a naked, boring walkway was turned into a lush, colourful path with surprisingly little elbow grease.

Despite the border's vibrant personality, the gardeners didn't plan any specific colour combinations. "We wanted something informal, yet colourful," explains Debbie, "not too low, and not too stiff or still. Most of all, though, it had to be low-care." To accomplish the task, the pair began by planting perennials, such as peonies, irises, lilies and a variety of shrubs. They then peppered these mainstays



**shopping list** Bee balm, catmint, purple coneflower, coreopsis, cornflower, shasta daisy, deadnettle, delphinium, perennial geranium, heuchera, iris, lavender, lily, lupin, phlox, salvia, spirea, sweet William, viburnum



**Above:** The border incorporates a stone fountain surrounded by roses. The unstructured, medium height of the poppies, coreopsis, spirea and salvia give the sense you're on a wilderness nature walk. **Far left:** From the main inn building the path takes

visitors down to the pool amid blossoming Shirley poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*)—self-seeding annuals (also shown near left)—salvia and a swath of Marguerite daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*). All are easy-care plants and thrive with benign neglect.

PHOTOGRAPHY, STACEY VAN BERKEL HAINES



## the dynamic duo's gardening tips

GO FROM BARREN TO BOUNTIFUL WHILE BARELY BREAKING A SWEAT.

- In addition to springtime planting, Debbie Turk and Darlene O'Connor like to install new perennials and divide their old ones in the autumn when the cooler soil temperatures will encourage more fresh root growth.
- Deadhead. Deadhead. Deadhead. That's the absolute best way to ensure there are continuous blooms in both perennials and annuals, without the work of replanting or the expense of buying new plants.
- Be wary of gardening gifts; a present can soon turn into a pain. "If someone wants to share a plant with you," says Darlene, "it's often because the plant is invasive and they already have too much."

with coreopsis and echinacea to give an unstructured, natural effect. Plants were summarily dismissed if they were temperamental, needed excessive irrigation or required fertilizing.

The one concession Debbie and Darlene did make was in using triple mix (a commercial mixture of equal parts topsoil, peat and compost) when the garden was first planted—but the soil hasn't been amended since. A light weeding and edging in spring and late summer, plus yanking out aggressive specimens, is the only maintenance required. And winter care? There is none—not even an ounce of mulch. "We're not what you would call big mulchers," says Darlene with a laugh. As for pests and disease, there haven't been any serious problems because almost all the plants are hearty native specimens, less susceptible to damage. "Unless you count Massey, the inn's dog," jokes Debbie. "He's the biggest 'pest' we have." [steannes.com](http://steannes.com)



**Top: The view looking back to the main inn reveals a lush, meandering natural landscape that has developed over time with very little attention**

**from the two gardeners. Yellow coreopsis (above), with its repeat blooms, spirea, yarrow and daylilies all feature prominently in the border's layout.**