



FROM FAR LEFT: Members of the Maple Cottage Garden Club take some time out from tending the garden to enjoy a bit of lively conversation; silver lace vine cascades over the arbour (left), while lilacs and alliums create a lush display in the perennial bed; the imposing Maple Leaf Forever tree stands sentry in front of Maple Cottage.

Local Heroes

An abandoned cottage, a famous tree and a nearby plot get a new lease on life with the help of an inspired community **BY MARY FRAN MCQUADE**

This is a story about an ugly duckling that turned into a swan. It's also a story about a historic tree that nearly became sawdust, and the people who banded together to save it.

Specifically, the tree is the 150-year-old majestic silver maple (*Acer saccharinum*) standing on an obscure side street in Toronto's east end, which is said to be the inspiration for the famous Canadian anthem *The Maple Leaf Forever*.

Back in the 1860s, local schoolmaster Alexander Muir was walking down Laing Street when a falling leaf from the tree sparked the idea for the song. For generations, neighbourhood folks have pointed out the Maple Leaf Forever tree to their children.

But by the early 1970s, the tree and the 19th-century worker's cottage behind it were in a sorry state. The last family to own it moved out in 1960 and the property was slated for development. Tiny Maple Cottage would be demolished and the beloved tree threatened by construction, until a minor miracle occurred.

Community outrage persuaded officials at the City of Toronto to designate Maple Cottage as a historical site in 1991. A year later, the property was purchased by the City and turned over to Toronto parks, forestry and recreation division. The much-loved tree was saved.

Afterwards, the tree and cottage seemed to be forgotten, until councillor Sandra Bussin took an active interest in 1998. With her support, the Friends of Maple Cottage was formed, a group of some 250 members. An active steering committee of 12 guided the cottage's restoration, aided by funds from all levels of government.

A big chunk of vacant land next to the cottage was just right for a garden, thought Dave Smith, then coordinator of nearby S.H. Armstrong Community Centre. "This was a unique chance for us to form a garden club," he says. "And it would benefit the people in the neighbourhood, since this area was underserved by community facilities."

In 2004, a group of dedicated volunteer gardeners



FROM FAR LEFT: The traditional parterre herb garden includes chives, sage, lemon balm, lavender and purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*); club chair Judith Ferguson tends a lilac shrub; bleeding heart (*Dicentra spectabilis*).

plants—and a plan

Maple Cottage Garden's design was inspired by renowned English gardener Gertrude Jekyll, known for her undulating beds and drifts of perennials. However, landscape designer Natasha Templeton, formerly of Janet Rosenberg & Associates, used fewer kinds of flowers in larger groups, and borders that are narrower and less complex than those in a Jekyll design. For posterity, the garden includes one of the big tree's own seed-grown saplings.

formed the Maple Cottage Garden Club to provide vision, enthusiasm and muscle. The following year, several city departments banded together to provide soil, hardscaping materials, starter plants and an irrigation system. The Toronto Parks and Trees Foundation, a city-formed charity, arranged for a planting plan donated by landscape architects Janet Rosenberg & Associates, as well as the plants to fill it.

Since opening in 2005, Maple Cottage Garden has become the community's garden. A core group of garden club members handle planting and upkeep, dropping by often for a bit of weeding or deadheading.

"When people see me working in the garden, they think I live here," says club chair Judith Ferguson, adding that they receive lots of compliments.

Another club member, Zina Tofano, adds, "My garden is very tiny, so I can branch out here." Her young grandson thinks it's grandma's garden.

The cottage and its garden have been the backdrop for weddings, anniversaries, memorials, barbecues and fundraisers. Yoga classes and children's programs are held indoors, in addition to the garden club's monthly meetings and educational workshops.

Locals stop by to sit with a coffee, and passersby often ask if it's okay to take a few seeds from the old tree to start their own maples. It's still young, but already Maple Cottage Garden has become a vital part of the lives of the volunteer gardeners and its community. ■ SOURCE GUIDE, PAGE 128

plant list



- 'WHIRLWIND' JAPANESE ANEMONE (*Anemone x hybrida* 'Whirlwind')
- 'SILVER BROCADE' ARTEMISIA (*Artemisia stelleriana* 'Boughton Silver' syn. 'Silver Brocade')
- 'ILE DE FRANCE' BUTTERFLY BUSH (*Buddleja davidii* 'Ile de France')
- 'WHITE PROFUSION' BUTTERFLY BUSH (*B. d.* 'White Profusion')
- 'GREEN GEM' BOXWOOD (*Buxus* 'Green Gem')
- 'ARTHUR SIMMONDS' BLUEBEARD (*Caryopteris x clandonensis* 'Arthur Simmonds')
- 'ETOILE VIOLETTE' CLEMATIS (*Clematis* 'Etoile Violette')
- 'THE PRESIDENT' CLEMATIS (*C.* 'The President')
- 'BLUE RIBBON' FLAT SEA HOLLY (*Eryngium planum* 'Blue Ribbon')
- 'ANNABELLE' HYDRANGEA (*Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle')
- OAKLEAF HYDRANGEA (*H. quercifolia*)
- 'HALL'S' JAPANESE HONEYSUCKLE (*Lonicera japonica* 'Halliana')
- 'SIX HILLS GIANT' CATMINT (*Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant')
- 'SENTIMENTAL BLUE' BALLOON FLOWER (*Platycodon grandiflorus* 'Sentimental Blue')
- 'BLANC DOUBLE DE COUBERT' ROSE (*Rosa* 'Blanc Double de Coubert')
- 'NEW DAWN' ROSE (*R.* 'New Dawn')
- 'THÉRÈSE BUGNET' ROSE (*R.* 'Thérèse Bugnet')
- 'MME LEMOINE' COMMON LILAC (*Syringa vulgaris* 'Mme Lemoine')
- HICKS YEW (*Taxus x media* 'Hicksii')
- CRIMSON THYME (*Thymus* *Coccineus* Group)
- 'SHASTA' DOUBLEFILE VIBURNUM (*Viburnum plicatum* forma *tomentosum* 'Shasta')
- PERIWINKLE (*Vinca minor*)