

Cottage Gardening

NATURAL BEAUTY

Visiting the cottage for me is about relaxing, it's about fishing, sharing time with friends, drinking a gin and tonic on a warm summers evening and enjoying the natural beauty of the near north; it is not about gardening. Little is written about developing such a garden however for the professional designer and horticulturist it is all about logic, common sense, and of course the principles of good horticulture. Gardening in more hospitable southern climates, with relatively even topography, is easy. The cottage garden is a challenge; we often have to deal with minimal maintenance, dry rocky soils, windy venues and occasional wildlife problems, yet we want it to look good so that we can enjoy it. Jacki Ciphery, president of Waters Edge Landscaping in Bala, an award winning landscape design build firm suggests "choosing the right plants for the site, not what you like or grows well in your city garden" since "exposure, steepness of slope, increased drainage and winds play a huge factor in plant survivability".

A cottage garden will most likely get minimal attention through the growing season, I know a few people who garden expertly at the cottage however I am not one. Short weekend visits and in cases less than ideal growing conditions warrant careful selection of plants. I was once shocked when I visited an area around Port Severn and saw dump truck after dump truck hauling loads of topsoil over the rock down to the waters edge. The natural beauty of the area was going to be blanketed by a perfect turf sward, a green pimple of perfection on the dramatic rocky landscape.

Appreciation of the natural beauty should be the focus of any garden, whether it is the home in London or the cottage in Lions Head. All planting and garden construction should focus on this aspect and respect the constraints placed upon the natural landscape; it is easier to work with nature than against it.



This Lions Head garden is planted on a dry, south facing slope with a bare 2cm of topsoil.

Cottages, often by their very location, are not as concise in culturing what we expect from a garden as our own homes; hence a change in expectations is required. Look around the area and see what is growing naturally. Many of our landscape plants such as Bearberry, Common Juniper, Trillium and Solomon's Seal come from these landscapes and actually thrive in them. These plants have evolved to grow in either the harsh, dry, hot conditions of a rocky landscape, or the acidic woodland. Once recognized, the local plant associations can be enhanced with plants with similar requirements, local garden centres can be a wealth of information on what will work.



Containers, wildlife and simple Hens and Chicks become a focal point in this cottage garden.

You may need to bring in some soil, but if so bring in local soil and develop planting pockets, especially if rock outcroppings are a dominant feature of the landscape. Ciphery suggests using only "locally quarried native topsoil and developing a working depth of twice that of pots" she further suggests that it wise to spend "time preparing the soil". Pocket plantings similar to rock gardening may be less obtrusive in the natural landscape and bring as much pleasure to the gardener. However, if soil conditions do exist mass plantings can work, however they should remain in context with the natural landscape, informality works well here. Driving north look at the roadside ditches, the planting is a tapestry of many plants all thriving in a relatively harsh environment.

The one advantage cottage gardens often have over London gardens is snow. Thick blankets of snow insulate plantings through particularly cold winters, I have often experienced losses in my own garden but driving three hours north see the same plant thriving, the snow was the insulator. Also some plants such as Lavender do much better when planted in the lean, warm, rocky soils on a sunny slope, producing a plant twice the size of the pampered southern cousins.

Selecting tough, resilient plants is the rule but you must recognize that any new plant will still need a little care until it is established. Mulching new plantings is critical if long absences are anticipated, shredded cedar or pine works well and will emulate some of the natural conditions found in local soils. Until establishment, watering is also critical, especially with planting under thirsty established trees. If you are going to plant trees and shrubs, select the smaller plants, they establish themselves easier and eventually will reach the size of a large specimen planted at the same time. Ciphery notes it is prudent when selecting plants to "buy locally, from small independent garden centres and contractors", often big box stores are tied to buying programs and sell plants that may not be suited to specific local conditions.

I have designed cottage gardens and always kept in mind my own expectations of the cottage. These gardens which I now occasionally enjoy through the eyes of appreciative clients with a gin and tonic in hand are no fuss gardens that thrive because the gardener is all but absent; they've gone fishing.

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