

# The best job



Cuddy garden Strathroy  
Story and photos by Michael Pascoe

*View of the house in spring, surrounded by Cersis and Spirea in bloom.*

**F**ew of us can say we have been given the perfect job, a job that has no restraints or boundaries, that effuses professionalism and enthusiasm and where passion abounds and high expectations are assumed. Where the question frequently asked is “is that as large as you could find?” Or “is that all you bought?” These sweet words and lofty expectations are seldom heard by a professional horticulturist.

AM (Mac) Cuddy, the founder of Cuddy Farms, the world’s largest producer of turkey poults and hatching eggs, was the person who gave me the perfect job. Mac has always taken a keen interest in horticulture and the landscape, having studied horticulture at the University of Guelph. This inter-

est and passion gave birth to a corporate policy that all company properties exemplify the finest in horticultural and landscape management practices.

My task in 1991 was to develop and institute a grounds maintenance program for all of the corporate Cuddy properties. Mac Cuddy, when selling this ideology to the corporate bean counters, would say “healthy on the outside, healthy on the inside”; if we looked good on the outside then what we were doing on the inside was obviously good.

Cuddy Farms today is a rarity in the horticultural world: it is one of the few large corporations with an in-house horticultural division. The staff of four maintains over 100

acres of lawn under a strict organic régime and follows total plant health practices throughout the Cuddy properties. This division operates with such efficiency and attention to quality that no outsourcing can compare. The jewel of the horticulture division is the Cuddy Gardens, the private estate that surrounds the Cuddy home.

The 12-acre Gardens were five years in the making and, so far, 14 years maturing. They are a paradise of garden rooms, plants and sound horticultural practices. Cuddy Gardens is also one of the few contemporary estate gardens in Ontario.

The initial garden construction phase proceeded at breakneck speed (all relative when we talk of gardens and the time it takes to



*Sun-kissed autumn leaves.*



*Magnolia tripetala with fruit.*

create them). Driveways were moved. Over 10,000 square feet of flagstone walks and patios were laid. Stone walls, cedar arbours and fences were built. More than two miles of cable were installed underground for high-voltage night lighting. At times during the construction phase, a dozen or more dump trucks would be on site and crews of stonemasons, labourers, carpenters and grounds staff would swarm the property intent on their individual tasks.

Following the hard construction phase of garden development there was, of course, the planting. Plants are what the Cuddy Gardens is truly all about.

A great London gardener named Louise Weekes has a fabulous comment about her

own plant acquisition skills: "I knew no shame when it came to a plant I wanted". Cuddy Gardens is built on that premise. Seeing a tree that would be perfect in our garden, I would stop and ask the unsuspecting homeowner if I could buy it. I must have been persuasive because we rarely failed in an acquisition. Which is fortunate; we needed big plants.

(Acquisitions from private properties sometimes turned into an adventure. One Saturday morning, when we came to move a purchased 10-inch caliper London plane tree (*Platanus X acerifolia*) we were greeted on our departure by a shocked teenager. Apparently the father, who was away on holiday, forgot to tell his son about the tree

moving; the youth, groggy from a night of partying, was left stuttering on the front porch as we drove down the street, tree on truck. Imagine the story the boy would try to come up with to explain to his father that the big tree had disappeared and no, he hadn't been drinking!)

The gardens showcase the 1890's yellow brick farmhouse and reflect the English planting style. Subtlety is the rule, and from the busy highway bordering the east side of the property there is little evidence of what lies beyond the dense shrub and evergreen borders. In fact, the comment from the locals during our annual open garden is that they did not realize what lay hidden behind the hedges.



*The Dry Garden, August 1995.*



*Rosa 'Seafoam' at the birdbath.*



*The annual border.*

The gardens evolved as complex layers of plants with changing weekly venues. There is always something to see and I am at a loss when asked, "What is the best time to visit the garden?"

The gardens developed as a series of themed rooms, with subtle transition plantings between adjoining spaces. These rooms are planted with over 2000 different species of plants, many rare and endangered or supposedly not hardy to our Zone-6b climate. In May some 60,000 bulbs bloom throughout the gardens, with over 30,000 narcissus

of 30 different species and cultivars flowering in the Woodland Garden alone.

The gardens are home to several rare and endangered local plants such as the yellow trillium (*Trillium luteum*) and the cucumber magnolia (*Magnolia acuminata*). A Ben Franklin tree (*Franklinia alatamaha*), the most northerly grown *Franklinia*, once found in the Southern United States but now extinct, also finds a home in the garden, as well as two large umbrella magnolia (*Magnolia tripetala*) with their three-foot long tropical-looking leaves.

The Dry Garden, a feature garden room, showcases plants that thrive in a dry climate and relies on foliage rather than bloom for visual appeal. The gravel paths give a Mediterranean feel and are actually planted with minor bulbs such as netted Iris (*Iris reticulata*) and self-sown perennials and biennials. These plants in the paths act as speed bumps, causing visitors to pause and enjoy the garden experience.

Masses of ornamental grass are the late summer anchors that carry the Dry Garden through the winter season. One of the defi-

*The Prairie Garden.*



*The Woodland Garden.*

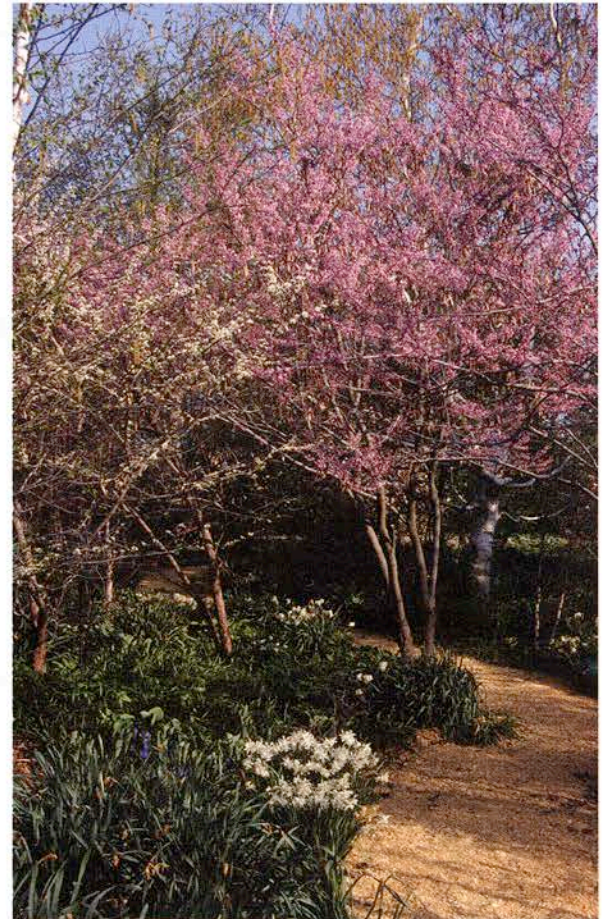


*The Rock Garden.*



*The Dry Garden, August 1997.*



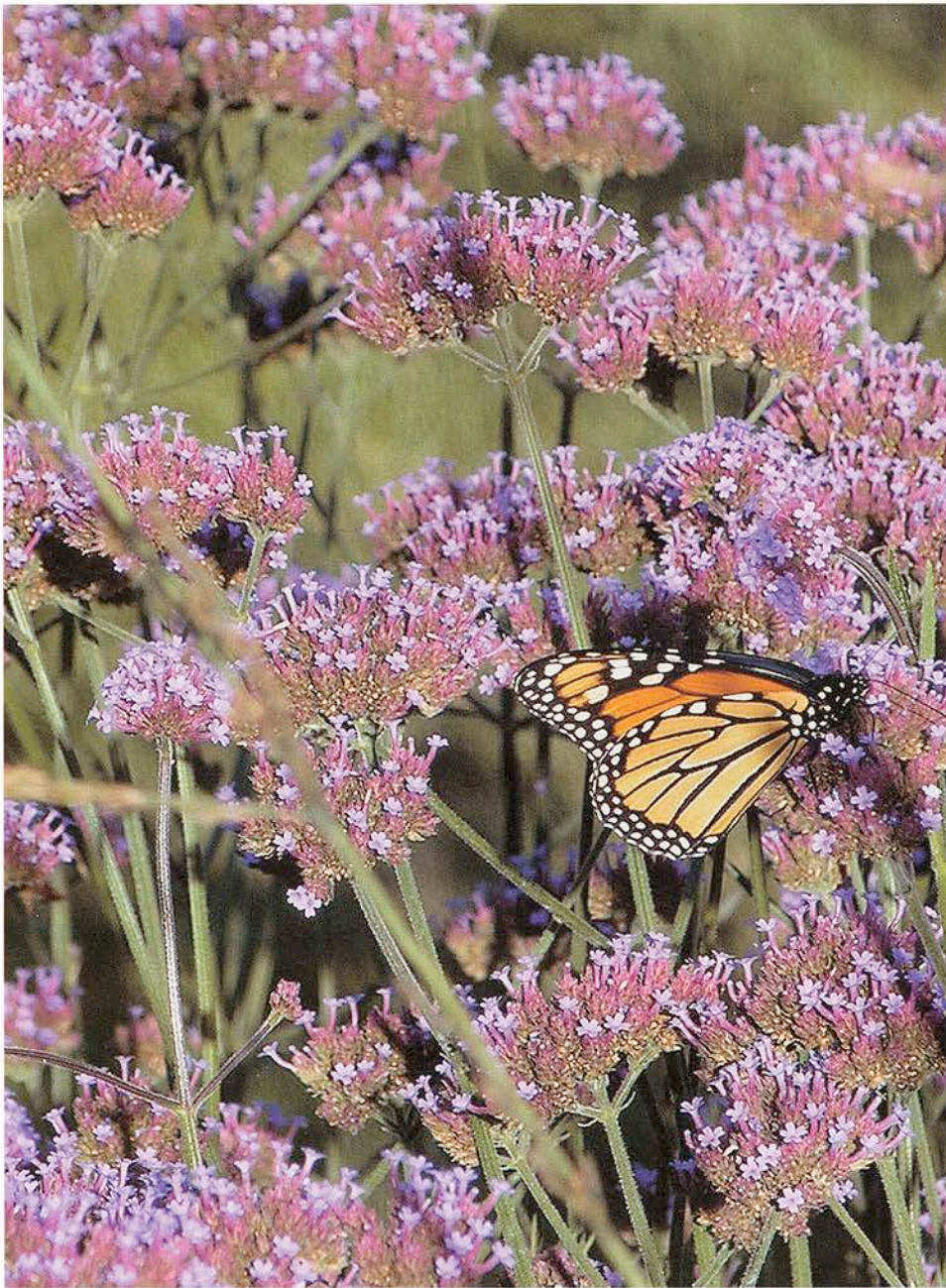


*Heuchera 'Plum Pudding' and Sedum spectabile 'Variegatum' in the Dry Garden.*

*Cercis canadensis and Cercis canadensis 'Alba' in bloom.*

*A tree spade moved the mature London plane tree (Platanus X acerifolia) some distance.*





*Monarch on Verbena bonariensis.*

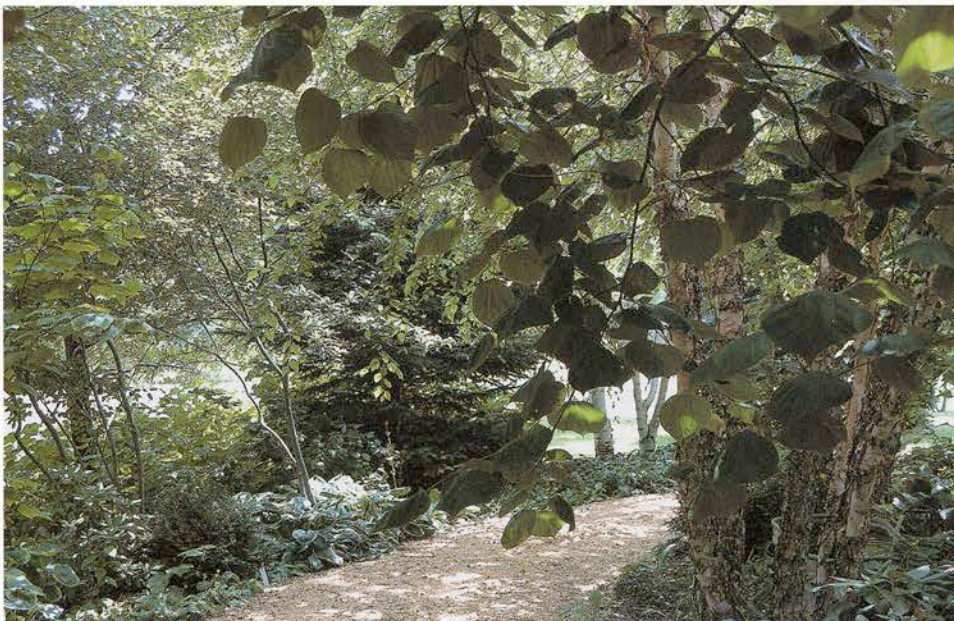
cits in Canadian garden designs is the lack of winter interest. Even though we may not be active participants because of the climate we can certainly be passive gardeners and enjoy the winter views.

Four chanticleer pears anchor each of the beds, the first two panels being shorter in length giving the illusion that all are the same size when viewed from a distance. This Dry Garden won a Perennial Plant Association award for perennial excellence in design in 1995.

The Woodland Garden recently underwent an expansion with the development of the Primrose Walk. In early spring this garden is a riot of colour with numerous bulbs, many rare and unusual like the yellow trillium (*Trillium luteum*). The Primrose Walk is spectacular in mid May, especially when canopied with the masses of spring flowering shrubs such as rhododendrons, redbuds (*Cercis canadensis*), whitebuds (*Cercis canadensis* 'Alba'), and goat's beard (*Fothergilla monticola*). The upper canopy is a mixture of river birch (*Betula nigra*), tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), shingle oak (*Quercus acutissima*), blue ash (*Fraxinus quadrangulata*) and black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*). The late spring and summer display in this garden features numerous varieties of ferns, *Corydalis*, butterbur and hosta. The humus layer, of primary importance to the plant species being grown in any woodland garden, is enriched every year by the addition of leaves collected from the formal lawn areas of the garden.

The gardens, under the watchful eye of head gardener Rick MacKinnon and myself, continue to thrive and evolve with recent additions to the Woodland Garden and further development of a rose garden planned for 2005. To the disbelief of many visitors to the gardens, plants here are not pampered; they are given one chance with the only supplemental supports being water and mulch and of course the opportunity to grow in a garden where passion is applied liberally.🌸

*The Woodland Garden.*



*The perennial border in spring.*

