




FAMILY

practice

A garden in Victoria filled with unusual plants has a long history with the Murphy family. Once dominated by a vegetable patch, it now acts as a pleasurable retreat for Steve and Cathy and a plant laboratory for their landscaper son, Paul.

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A photograph of a garden path. The path is made of grey gravel and is bordered on the right by a dense row of plants. The most prominent plant is a yellow loosestrife (Lysimachia punctata) with bright yellow flowers. To its right is a golden threadleaf cypress (Chamaecyparis pisifera 'Filifera Aurea') with fine, golden-yellow needles. In the foreground, there are several large, bright green ferns and some hosta leaves. The background shows more greenery and a building with a window.

The bright colour of yellow loosestrife (*Lysimachia punctata*) is echoed down the path in a golden threadleaf cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera Aurea'). OPPOSITE: For a splash of colour among ferns and hostas, Steve Murphy sets a ready-made hanging basket of annuals into a container. On the right is a young rice-paper plant (*Tetrapanax papyrifer*).



IF VICTORIA GARDENERS STEVE AND Cathy Murphy have a garden dilemma, they don't have far to look for help. Their son Paul is not only a keen plantsman but also a landscaper and designer (his garden was featured in the Summer 2013 issue of *Canadian Gardening*). He grew up in this house in a charming pocket of Victoria's Oak Bay neighbourhood where his garden education started early. "He couldn't do his homework until he'd pulled some weeds," says Steve with a laugh.

"I was lucky that I was given the freedom to experiment," says Paul, who applied his talents to the 55-square-metre vegetable patch that dominated the backyard for several years. But as his hort knowledge grew so did the garden. An interest in native plants soon expanded to a passion for the rare and unusual. In this, he was aided and abetted by his parents, who are self-confessed plantaholics. "I'd come over and there were always some pots in the driveway with

plants looking for a home," says Paul, who lives about 10 minutes away.

Bit by bit, beds were shaped, paths were added and plants moved around in a horticultural game of musical chairs that has resulted in an all-season garden of earthy delights. Lushness abounds on every level, from ground-covering sedums, lacy ferns and heucheras to a statuesque katsura tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*) holding centre stage and a Red Emperor Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum* var. *atropurpureum* 'Emperor I') draping its canopy over a handsome gazebo – with much more in between.

While spring sees a bevy of rhododendrons and azaleas flaunting their brilliant blooms, the emphasis is on foliage colour and texture. "Sometimes people look at the garden and say, 'Oh, there's not much colour,'" says Steve, "but just look at all the different greens!" Hostas, ferns and conifers offer endless variations on the green theme, set off by the likes of purple »

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE, LEFT: Tucked behind the big leaves of *Darmera peltata*, maiden grass and *Euphorbia griffithii* 'Dixter', a gazebo sheltered by a Red Emperor Japanese maple is a favourite spot; ferns, irises and *ligularia* mingle under a katsura tree; azaleas and rhododendrons dazzle in spring. **OPPOSITE:** Foliage contrast is key in this combo of rhodos, box-leaved hebe (*Hebe odora* 'New Zealand Gold') and Bowles' golden sedge (*Carex elata* 'Aurea').



garden stats

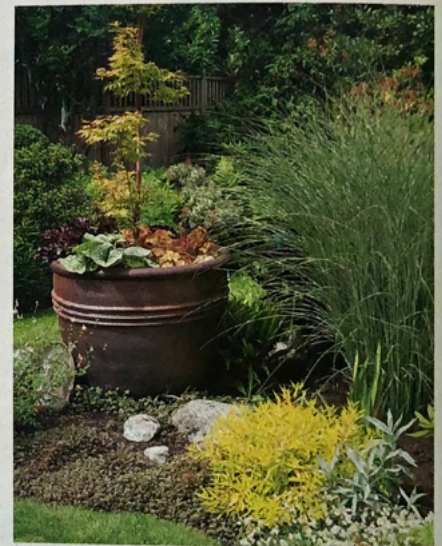
SIZE: 390 square metres **ZONE:** 8 **ORIENTATION:** Back garden faces west **AGE OF GARDEN:** Evolved over the last 10 to 15 years **CONDITIONS:** Deep soil amended annually with shredded leaf mulch; mix of sun and shade **GROWING SEASON:** Year-round **FOCUS:** Intricate mixed borders with unusual plants, focusing on texture and colour **FAVOURITE ITEM:** For Steve Murphy, it's "a gin and tonic and a good book in the gazebo" **TIP:** Create cohesiveness by using different varieties of the same genus, *Hosta* or *Rhododendron*, for example, or by using different plants of the same colour



LEFT: Over a stunning pink rhododendron, the view from the raised deck reveals the garden's intricate combinations of foliage texture and colour. Paths of stone-edged gravel or grass wind throughout the garden, defining the areas and making the space seem much larger. Because the deck gets very hot in summer, Steve gave up trying to grow container plants there. In contrast, he says the garden is very sheltered so it's cooler in summer and warmer in spring and fall.



LEFT: A potted *Agave americana* 'Marginata' looks sculptural amid ferns and golden 'Angelina' sedum (*Petrosedum rupestre*). The little glass orbs among the rocks are part of a collection of spheres the Murphys use to create repetition throughout the garden. BELOW: Set beside a feathery maiden grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light') and dwarf golden abelia, a giant clay pot features a coral bark Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum* 'Sango kaku') underplanted with heuchera and brunnera. OPPOSITE: A flowering spirea (*Spiraea japonica* cv.) is set off by a weeping European larch (*Larix decidua* 'Pendula') and a *Hosta* 'Francee' (*fortunei*).



ninebarks and grasses both silver and gold.

A major challenge is not, as you might think, finding planting space but dealing with the changing amount of ground water in winter and spring. "It's more intense and lasts longer," says Paul. "If there's a king tide, full moon and lots of rain, water accumulates and forms large puddles. Plants sensitive to wet suffer, so I've changed my planting style, using things like American sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua* cvs.), gunnera and elder (*Sambucus* spp. and cvs.) that can cope with wetter conditions."

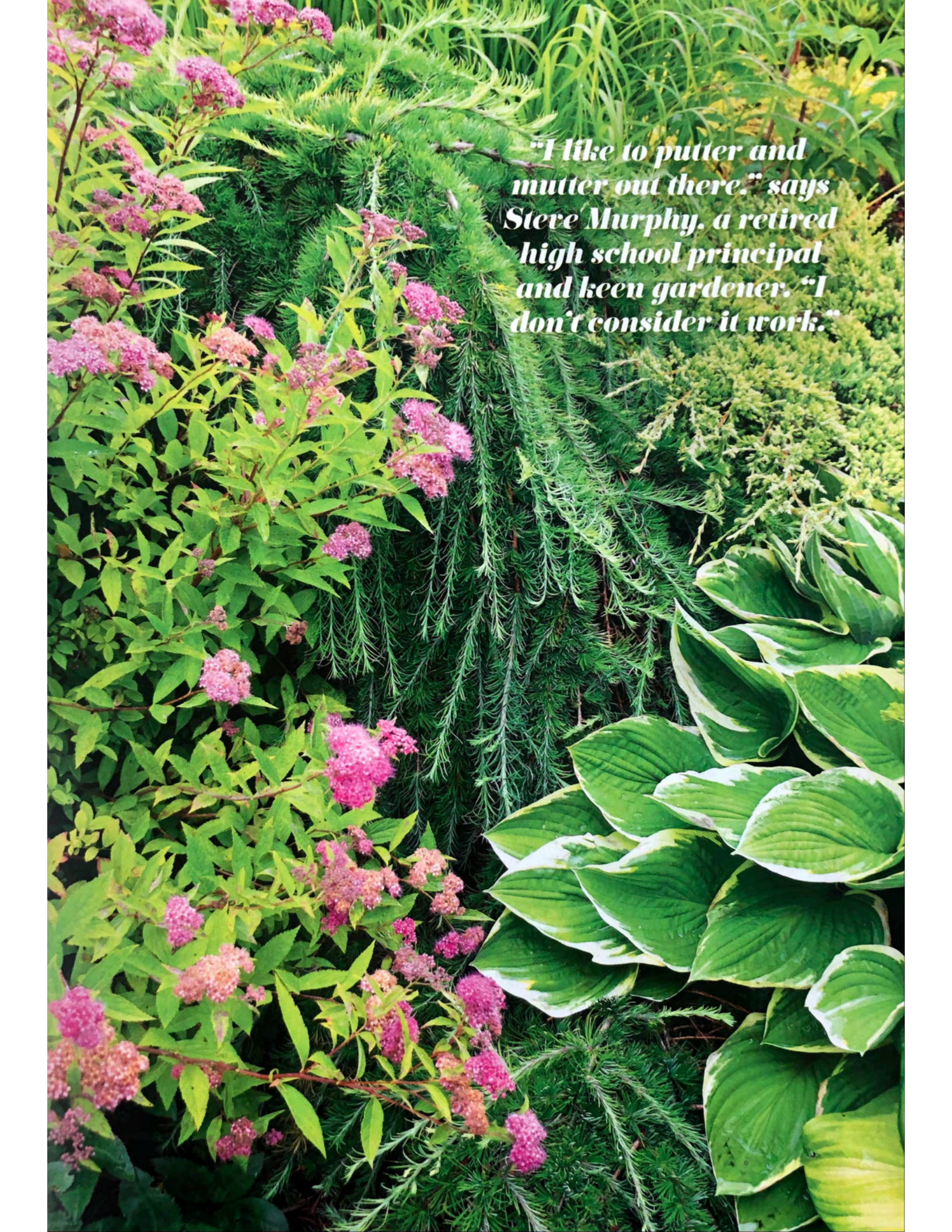
His plant experiments continue, although, even here, pushing the envelope can backfire. An acacia by the raised deck was lost in a cold snap, followed by a Japanese maple that was infected with a virus; now, an unusual Japanese emperor oak (*Quercus dentata* 'Pinnatifida') fills the space. Other exotic specimens include the large-leaved rice-paper plant (*Tetrapanax papyrifer*) and winged thorn rose (*Rosa sericea* ssp. *omeiensis* forma *pteracantha*) with giant red thorns that positively glow when backlit by the sun.

Annuals in the garden are limited to planters. Steve prefers to fill any gaps with fruits and veggies – an edging of

lettuce here, a tomato plant there, along with cucumbers and strawberries. Art plays a role, too, particularly a tall concrete sculpture by Victoria-based artist Birgit Piskor. Indeed, for a number of years, Steve and Cathy held a summer art show in the garden, showcasing the work of local potters, painters and jewellers. "It was lots of fun," says Steve.

While Paul does much of the "heavy lifting," Steve and Cathy spend three or four days a week tending the garden. "I like to putter and mutter out there. I don't consider it work," says Steve, a retired high school principal. The back garden is fenced so deer aren't an issue, but it's a different story in front, where mixed borders frame a grove of venerable oak trees. "There, I spray religiously with Bobbex."

Steve says a critical element to the garden's success, "apart from Paul," was putting in an irrigation system nearly 10 years ago (winters are wet but summers are very droughty). "I'd drag the hose around all summer, trashing plants in the process, so it made a huge difference." Future plans include removing some cedars and installing a new fence across the back and, of course, there are always more plants to try in this garden that is truly a family affair.

A vibrant garden scene featuring a variety of plants. On the left, there are clusters of small, bright pink flowers on green stems. In the center, there are dense, dark green, needle-like plants, possibly a type of pine or cedar. On the right, there are large, broad, green leaves with prominent white variegation, characteristic of hosta plants. The overall scene is a dense, colorful display of summer garden flora.

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