

Aurora's natural environment was David Tomlinson's passion



David Tomlinson always insisted he was not a "people person."

Instead, he contended he was happiest in nature "cultivating plants, designing lush and fragrant gardens, counting birds, and restoring habitat lost or impacted by development."

Nobody who knew David Tomlinson would ever agree with his assertion as his tireless work in Aurora had a profound impact on the community so many call home "and now they are remembering the famed landscape architect and the legacy he has left behind."

David Tomlinson, whose name is now carried by Aurora's David Tomlinson Nature Reserve in the Town's northeast quadrant, died Friday, September 8, at North Bay Regional Health Centre.

The last pages of his final chapter were written in the northern community to which he and his wife, Dierdre, moved last year to be closer to family after the sale of their home, Merlin's Hollow. Merlin's Hollow was the renowned garden the couple built for themselves on Aurora's Centre Crescent, to which they welcomed members of the public each summer for more than 40 years.

Despite the move, Aurora was always close their hearts, and Tomlinson made the trek to Aurora Council last year to advocate for his eponymous nature reserve and his decades-long vision for the space.

"On behalf of Council and the Town of Aurora, I offer my deepest condolences to the Tomlinson family," said Mayor Tom Mrakas in a statement. "David was a true pillar of our Town, leaving an indelible mark through his passion for gardening, nature, and landscape architecture. As we mourn his passing, we must also celebrate the legacy he leaves behind."

"In 2020, the David Tomlinson Nature Reserve was named in his honour, after his instrumental work to protect the nature reserve and the wildlife that call it home. He has truly made a lasting impact on our Town and he will be dearly missed."

For his environmental advocacy, Tomlinson was named Aurora's Citizen of the Year in 2009.

Phyllis Morris, who served as Aurora's mayor during this time, said the community had "lost one of its very best."

“David worked his magic for so many years to create and care for the much-loved Merlin's Hollow,” she said. “He and Dierdre nurtured an absolutely wonderful little piece of heaven on earth; a calming green sanctuary tucked away up a little lane in a fast-growing urban town – a whimsical cottage adding to the charm. His life-long passion and genuine love of nature was evident and lives on for all to enjoy in the landscapes and gardens he designed and created.

“David will never be forgotten by those who had the privilege to know him, to work and volunteer alongside him in an ongoing effort to protect and enhance the natural environment. David was such a special soul. No doubt many hearts are heavy at the news of his passing. To say he'll be missed is a huge understatement. He is simply irreplaceable.”

David Tomlinson, born in 1934, hailed from Manchester, UK.

Describing himself as anything but a scholar, he began his apprenticeship in landscape gardening at the age of 12, climbing his way up the proverbial trellis.

He first visited Canada in 1974 and it was not long thereafter that he and Dierdre decided to make the move.

They first secured an unfurnished house on Wellington Street where neighbours rallied to help them make the house a home with extra furniture and other creature comforts. It not only gave them a strong foundation in the community but underscored the importance of giving back to their adopted hometown.

While he continued with his work as a landscape architect, he put his expertise to work within Aurora as a long-time founder and volunteer with the Nature Aurora, as well as with the Aurora Community Arboretum, the Aurora Garden and Horticultural Society, among other opportunities.

“David Tomlinson was an honourable man who did his utmost to respect and protect the natural environment,” said Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner. “He gladly shared his knowledge and wisdom with those who would listen. David's contributions made Aurora a better place.”

Many of Aurora's greenspaces are a testament to his expertise and advocacy, but perhaps none more so than the nature reserve that was dedicated in his honour in October of 2020, following a motion from Councillor John Gallo.

“Even in his 90th year David left us too soon,” said Gallo. “I am honoured to have known him. His work in designing Aurora's Nature Reserve and continuous dedication to its construction, over many Councils, is truly remarkable. Generations of Aurorans will benefit from his vision and passion to have it finally completed. He was truly one of a kind.”

The Nature Reserve, which begins at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex on Wellington Street East and stretching north toward St. John's Sideroad, was a long-term dream for Tomlinson.

His vision for the space did not always align with those of municipal staff, or even the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, but was ultimately brought to fruition with tweaks made along the way.

“I always tried to resist it being named after me,” Tomlinson told The Auroran just after the dedication ceremony, noting he always referred to it as the Ivy Jay Nature Reserve, the name given to the area by former landowner Jim Spring, who turned many of the parcels of land over to Ducks Unlimited.

“I have mixed feelings about it, but I am very pleased they have done it. Dierdre is very pleased about it, my family is pleased about it, and my family in England is, too. They know I have been working on it for years.

“I am very pleased with the way it is coming along. In the end, I think it is going to become a national example of how you create a

nature reserve in an urban area and I think it is really going to set the standard. If it works well and the public keeps to the trails and not try to walk all over the place, I think it will end up being an eco-tourist thing. It is not just people from Aurora who will travel to see it.?

In spite of leaving himself out of the list of people who were 'pleased' by the dedication, it was clear that it was a reluctant source of pride and it will keep the name and the legacy of David Tomlinson alive for generations to come.

David Tomlinson was 89.

He is survived by Dierdre, daughter Beth, grandson Booker, and Sylvia Hillier. He was predeceased by daughter Melinda, whose life was memorialized for many years within Merlin's Hollow.

David's friends will honour his legacy on Tuesday, September 26, at 7 p.m. with an informal gathering at the Gazebo in the Aurora Arboretum (entrance at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex). Everybody is welcome and people are encouraged to bring a candle, their own lawn chair and a cup of tea.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter