

Famed Merlin's Hollow will live on in gardens across Aurora



For more than 40 years, gardeners and plant lovers have made Merlin's Hollow a spring and summer destination.

For five colourful days each season prior to the pandemic, visitors were able to enjoy the private paradise of David and Dierdre Tomlinson on Centre Crescent, but as the Tomlinsons prepare to wind down the garden and sell their home, the plants that made Merlin's Hollow famous will live on throughout Aurora.

Since the Tomlinsons made their difficult decision to sell up last year, members of the Aurora Garden and Horticultural Society have been hard at work helping the couple divide up the plants from their garden for sale. It's not only a fundraiser for the Society, which brought in thousands of dollars last year from the first round of plants, but a way to ensure the Merlin's Hollow legacy endures in the community.

This spring, as the Tomlinsons weigh their options, their focus will be digging up bulbs to distribute to members of the club and the community at large through the ongoing fundraiser.

"In 18 months, we could be in the middle of a building site," says David, 87, with a chuckle, noting most of the land surrounding theirs has been sold for development. "I can still do [the garden work] but what I could do in half an hour takes me five hours to do now and that's one of the problems."

The Tomlinsons, and their daughters Beth and Melinda, moved into Merlin's Hollow in 1979.

David wasn't especially particular on where he and his family wanted to plant roots; their single biggest criterion being a small, well-built house on a large lot.

What they found was a 1930s home, which the daughter of the original owner recalled as being a house built from a kit, with just the right topography to transform the land into something special.

"Dierdre told me about the property she found [when I was in Calgary] and I thought, 'but there's nothing there!'" says David on how they came to discover the plot on Aurora's last-surviving residential dirt road. "I had nothing to do with the selection of this house, but it couldn't have been a better location because it's protected on the north side and the west side. It's open on the south and the east and it slopes to the southeast so it is well-drained. You couldn't have chosen a better site."

Indeed, you would be hard-pressed to find any visitor to Merlin's Hollow to disagree, whether they gravitate to the alpine garden,

thyme lawn, or any number of flower borders overflowing with blooms.

?We thought last year was going to be our last season, but what we did is we got together with the Aurora Garden & Horticultural Society [to divide the plants],? says David. ?When a developer comes, they're not going to be interested in this garden, it's all going to be bulldozed, and I said it would be a shame to lose all these unusual plants that we have. They arranged a series of plant sales last fall and because it was COVID, we couldn't have people coming around, so it was all online. The proceeds went to the Horticultural Society.

?We're looking to sell the bulbs in the spring. If we don't sell the house before the spring, we will probably open Merlin's Hollow up and carry on moving the plants out.?

Many of the rare native plants that flourished in Merlin's Hollow have already been transferred to the nature reserve which bears his name for the entire community to enjoy.

But David, by his own admission, says he isn't a huge fan of native plants.

?I think you should grow native plants if you can, but native plants are not used to being in highly-disturbed areas that we create,? he says. ?Generally, our native plants are woodland plants because our area used to be wall-to-wall woodland with very little open space. We don't live in shady areas, we live in very open woodland edge areas. I believe in growing what grows best in the climate you have. If you have to put up with Norway Maples down the street, they're better than nothing.

?It has been a fascinating voyage of discovery. I have always been interested in discovering what makes things tick. This has gone a long way to making people garden more.?

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