

# How Did This Beautiful Garden Come To Be?

Robert Hutchinson — Fennville, Michigan

On a beautiful spring morning I look about in awe at what has come to be. I am not a gardener. I did not set out to have a gorgeous riot of spring color at my door but here it is. For it, I must acknowledge the help of four talented designers.

This story began nearly 50 years ago when my wife Edith and I decided we needed a larger house for our growing family of four boys. Across the street from our little house was a worn out farm of about 32 acres. It contained 10 acres of peach trees past their prime, and the rest was not cultivated. The land was available.

Our house was completed in 1960, and about two acres of grounds were laid out. A first mistake, and one that I regret because it could not be corrected, was our failure to have the architect collaborate with a landscape designer before construction began so that the chosen location was “just right.” The two acres of grounds around the house are manicured gardens, the rest has been left natural.

My first vision for the property was as a horse farm with its attendant activities for the boys. That did not last long because none of them had any interest at all in horses.

We wanted the grounds to be attractive; and, realizing we needed professional help, we turned to Gordon Kennedy, a landscape designer working out of Grand Rapids, Michigan. He laid out the basic planting design, which consisted of lindens along the drive and groupings of pin oaks in the front and back lawns. Masses of *Forsythia* and *Viburnum sieboldii* bordered the road on the east. Throughout the grounds he introduced flowering

crabapples, sweet gum, and redbud trees. On the west he planted a bed of *Amelanchier*, dogwood, olives (now gone), and hemlocks. He also designed a circular bluestone patio on the south side of the house.

After the close of the war in 1945, Charles Mann was assigned to Allegan County by the US Soil Conservation Service, working out of the Fennville office. He began to develop his vision of the potential for the trees and plants he loved during his Virginia boyhood for planting in the shore area of Lake Michigan. He soon gained recognition as a talented gardener and landscape designer who was transforming Michigan gardens and landscape planting.

I liked the idea of a project periodically, and we engaged Charlie to do some work for us. He designed and planted the driveway entrance, which included banks of Canadian hemlock fronted with *Magnolia stellata*, weeping cherry, American holly, and masses of mixed rhododendrons and azaleas. He also designed and furnished the southeast perimeter planting that consists of 'Mucronatum' azaleas, rhododendrons, white and pink dogwoods, *Roseum elegans*, American and English Roseum Rhododendrons backed by Carolina and Canadian hemlock with Japanese red pines and *Oxydendrum*. We added a swimming pool at about that time on the west side of the house. He planted the great yew hedge and the beautiful Kwansan cherry. He designed the little garden house and the gate to the pool.

We left Fennville for about nine years, but retained ownership of the property, intending to return. The grounds received minimal attention during that time, but when we came

back in 1985, Carol Hop of Wavecrest Nursery and Landscape contributed greatly to revitalizing and improving the grounds. She transformed the swimming pool into the present water garden, built the front patio entrance, supervised the construction of the pond, and designed the garden located to the north of the residence. She tied many of the plantings together with ground covers of *Pachysandra*, English ivy, and *Vinca minor*. About 2,000 daffodil bulbs were added to the ground cover beds for a spring showing to complement the *Forsythia*, redbuds, azaleas, and dogwoods planted by Kennedy and Mann.

Finally, in recent years, Mark Miller has served as a consultant, designer, and friend, fine-tuning the layout of the garden and lawn areas, introducing new trees and plants, and improving the vistas from the residence.

As I write this little history I am struck by how the garden is an ever-changing work in progress. The basic structure remains, as the large trees have reached their stately beauty, but some have come down and others will leave us soon, only to be replaced by new plantings. The garden will continue to evolve into even more beauty as loving and talented people help it live.

*Robert Hutchinson is a retired executive from the food canning industry. Not really a gardener himself, he thoroughly enjoys the results of other designers' and gardeners' work. [This garden is on the first day of tours May 20, 2005, during the Holland, Michigan, convention; see a photo of it in The Azalean for Winter 2004 26(4) page 76, Ed.]*