

Globe Real Estate

OUTDOORS



Getting down to Earth, where the sky's the limit

Million-dollar gardens are taking root in a backyard near you.
We unearth the latest home decor trend



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Recession or no recession, the demand for big-ticket landscaping is growing - spurred on by a booming local real-estate market and the presence of gardening shows like Canada Blooms, opening in Toronto on Wednesday.

With homeowners spending money as if it grew on the trees they are newly coveting, the million-dollar garden is - even before the snow melts - the season's hottest home decor trend.

"It's the new status symbol," says Ron Holbrook, the award-winning Toronto-based landscape architect who is booked through most of 2010 with no job costing less than \$200,000 - his bare minimum starting

price.

"A fabulous garden is what everyone wants these days."

To get it, Mr. Holbrook's Canadian clients - and they include billionaire David Thomson, fashion entrepreneur Joe Mimran, singer Nelly Furtado, media mogul Allan Slaight and an assortment of Reichmans too many to mention - are upping the ante, asking for outdoor rooms as meticulously designed as their home's (often) deluxe interiors. In them, Mr. Holbrook's clients are asking for the newest must-have garden accessory - the outdoor fireplace, which extends a summer garden's enjoyment (especially in Canada) into the cooler months.

For Toronto manufacturer Alan Gozlan's backyard, Mr. Holbrook started first with a walk-through of the client's Forest Hill home to ensure a seamless connection with what he was designing outdoors.

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Landscape architect Ron Holbrook, with a portfolio that includes, among others, these garden in Toronto (above) and Ottawa (left), is booked through most of 2010 with no job costing less than \$200,000 - his minimum starting price.

RON HOLBROOK

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Gardens worth more than the house

» “Cost simply didn’t matter,” says Mr. Gozlan. “In fact, I never even looked at the price. [The garden] is something extremely emotional for us and it brings us great enjoyment each time we look at it.”

Incorporating a pre-existing rectangular pool and a mature hedge that came with the property into his design, Mr. Holbrook’s garden expanded on not only the home’s interior design but its overall enjoyment.

“We gave him very little guidance other than opening our doors to him so he could get a feel for what we like,” Mr. Gozlan says.

Gentrifying nature isn’t new, of course. European aristocrats have been artfully pruning their hedges for centuries.

But it’s popularity among Canadians for whom the garden is an all-too brief one-season pleasure is often more a matter of lifestyle than real-estate value.

Mr. Holbrook cites the example of a Collingwood, Ont., client who commissioned \$2-million worth of landscaping on a 10-acre property where the house was little more than a ramshackle chalet. It’s the most expensive garden Mr. Holbrook has ever designed.

“Sometimes the garden ends up being worth more than the house,” he says. “This is when the garden isn’t just to accent the house, it’s the more important experience.”

Increasingly, a home’s outdoor space is where people want to congregate.

For his downtown Toronto garden, Joe Mimran, founder of Club Monaco and Joe Fresh, asked Mr. Holbrook to create a great outdoor entertaining space with “a bit of folly.”

“We also wanted a garden that looked very much the same in the winter as the summer,” he says.

“All the rooms face the back garden, so we wanted a visual treat from every view.

“I think gardens are an integral part of the design of any home. It’s about creating an atmosphere and environment that transports you.”

But it’s not just the very rich who are getting down to Earth - ironically, with the sky as their limit.

Nickolaos Kon, co-owner of Toronto-based Fossil Landscapes, says that his clients tend to be more suburban than socialite but even they are demanding gardens that cost as much as \$600,000, the budget for a garden he recently completed in Oakville.

“We’re seeing clients, not just the wealthier ones, spending more on their landscapes,” Mr. Kon says.

“People who have luxurious backyard retreats want to spend more time at home because it’s a wonderful way to spend the summer months. It’s an investment in the home as a representation of personal style, similar to any other aspect of home renovation, these days.”

But an expensive garden also represents an investment in a property’s real-estate value, says Mr. Holbrook.

“You put in high-quality landscaping and you get your money back when you sell the house. A great garden really enhances a house. It just makes sense.”

A case in point is a property in Rockcliffe, Ont., Ottawa’s wealthiest neighbourhood, where last year Mr. Holbrook completed a \$1.4 million garden.

The home recently went on the market with a sale price of \$6.990 million, making it by far the most expensive house on the block.

It’s the garden that tipped the scale.

“I think it’s one of the finest in all of Ottawa,” says the homeowner, a businessman who requested anonymity for this article.

“It’s made the house more saleable, more valuable, that’s for sure.”

For the project, Mr. Holbrook departed from his signature classical approach to create an English-style garden that he felt better complimented the home’s manorial architecture.

The sprawling property was originally built in 1932 to house the spinster granddaughters of 19th century Canadian lumber

baron, Henry Franklin Bronson. In the 1950s it became the home of esteemed Canadian diplomat, Alfred Rive. His socialite wife, the memorable Harriet Rive, died there, at age 101, in 2005 - the year the present homeowner purchased it as part of an estate sale.

The house had retained its sense of old world elegance on the inside, but outside the grounds were run-down.

Neglect had turned the original 1932 garden into a forest, overrun with Norway Maple, an invasive species.

One of the first things Mr. Holbrook did in tackling the garden was cut it all down, save for three old trees he deemed worth saving.

Then to give the homeowner back his privacy, Mr. Holbrook planted walls of new but mature trees, some nearly six metres tall - Multistem Birch, Serbian Spruce, White Pine, Norway Spruce and Nootka Cypress, averaging in price between \$1,600 to \$3,500 each, depending on the species. This is where the bulk of the money was spent.

“The homeowner wanted instant satisfaction,” Mr. Holbrook says. “You don’t get that with saplings that take 20 years to fill out.”

A lot of money was also spent on the garden’s foundation, which Mr. Holbrook insisted on investing as much time, labour and materials as needed to ensure that the resulting garden never “shifts or heaves or settles” over a lifetime of enjoyment.

Add to that the \$200,000 spent on custom stone work, the \$250,000 spent on planting materials, the \$35,000 pond decorated with an Art Deco sculpture, the \$70,000 garden pavilion, \$40,000 boxwood shrubs, the \$20,000 irrigation system and the \$100,000 sophisticated lighting system and there you have it, ladies and gentleman, a modern-day Garden of Eden with God in the details.

“It doesn’t take much to spend a million in a high-end garden,” says Mr. Holbrook, making no excuses.

“Especially when you are making one to last.”