

# End of an Era: Larkwhistle's Last Public Season

By Gloria Hildebrandt Photos by Mike Davis

Near Dyer's Bay, close to the Niagara Escarpment in the far northern part of the Bruce Peninsula, where southern gardeners would not expect to find an impressive garden, is one that you may want to visit this year while you still can.

This will be the last summer and fall that the public can visit the beautiful garden Larkwhistle, near Dyer's Bay.

Larkwhistle is one of the most famous private gardens in Canada, thanks to several books and magazine articles its owners have had published over the years. Patrick Lima and John Scanlan came to the area in 1975 and got to work creating what has become an inspiration to countless other gardeners, most with much gentler growing conditions.

What they were faced with is evocatively described by Lima in their 1992 book *The Kitchen Garden*: "...a flat field waist-high in swaying grass. A towering dead elm tree, gray and barkless, spread its twisted arms against the sky. A leaning barn, sided with weathered wooden shingles, sheltered a flock of swallows. Toppling fence posts, looped with rusty barbed wire, outlined what may once have been a garden. Half-hidden in tall grass, an old iron hand-pump stood beside a shoulder of exposed rock. The flat field was broken here and there by piles of rock, old apple trees and banks of lilac bushes."



▲ One of the seven water-and-fish-filled pools throughout the garden that make watering by hand convenient.

◀ Although the plan was to stick to organic vegetables, perennial flowers in colour schemes were soon added. Scanlan loves roses and takes care of the flowers while Lima tends the veggies.

House with a view: front windows look onto the one-acre front yard that is the intensively planted Larkwhistle Garden ▼



They began growing food organically. Then as is usual for gardeners, they became more ambitious.

"John tells me that when he first saw the flat hayfield that was to become our garden, he thought, 'I'd like to make something beautiful here.'" So wrote Lima in their 1998 book, *The Art of Perennial Gardening*.

What they achieved is amazing: a beautiful combination of flowers, vegetables, herbs, fruits, shrubs, trees, in a one-acre space that is large for a garden but actually small for the wealth of what they grow. Everything is intensively planted together, vegetables among flowers, which in some places have been planted



▲ Flowers and vegetables co-exist beautifully. Note the care taken with the watering can. "I don't like to see water on the paths," says Lima. "It doesn't do any good there."

◀ The potting shed is conveniently located in the middle of the planting beds. Its design is in harmony with the house and adds beauty to the garden.

The potting shed where seeds are started. Hot peppers, grown in pots in the shed all summer, produce well. ▶



according to colour schemes, with the result being a lush, rich space that intoxicates with scents and buzzes with bees, butterflies, birds and hummingbird moths.

Those who like structure in a garden will admire the harmony created by the rustic components here. There are no stretches of lawn, only narrow, hard-trodden,

permanent walking paths around rich beds. Cedar rail fences divide the space. Arbours provide height, support for vines, and vertical interest. A few wooden benches are available, but not enough to be a distraction from work. Containers and pots of plants add variety through the garden. Concrete pools of sun-warmed

water are spaced throughout, providing easy access when watering is required.

#### Hand Watering

"During the 18 years when we had no electricity and hence, no water pressure, we watered the whole garden with watering cans," explains Lima. "After we

'got in the hydro' as old-timers used to say up here, we still water quite a bit of the garden in the same way, warm water dipped from the thirstiest plants as and when they need it. We also use a wand attachment on a hose to water





the large beds of vegetables, all of which are sculpted with a raised rim of earth around their edges, so that the water stays where it's needed and doesn't flow into the paths. Very occasionally, we'll set up a sprinkler to soak a wide perennial bed, but for the most part we find sprinklers both a bother and a waste. Soaker hoses might be run the length of a row of leeks or snaked through a potato bed, but before you know it, they've sprung a leak or worse, and we go back to the trusty watering cans or standing in the garden with hose in hand. We're very fortunate to have an excellent well, not very deep but always full of water."

### The Beginning

Lima and Scanlan have opened their garden to visitors for more than 35 years. After this year, they will scale back the size and relax from the pressure of having to keep it in perfect shape for the public's scrutiny.

"Early on, we knew that opening to visitors was something we just had to do, part of the flow of our work," says Lima. "We were so enthused about gardening, and so gratified by the results of our work, we simply wanted to share the place. I remember one June morning, before the garden was officially open to the public, the garden was so colourful and fresh, a few



▲ Cedar rail fences divide the garden into sections and arbour structures add vertical interest.

◀ Patrick Lima, left, and John Scanlan began to create Larkwhistle in an abandoned hayfield. Lima's writing and Scanlan's photography made their beautiful garden famous.

The heady perfume of dianthus draws a hummingbird moth. ▼



cars driving slowly by, people inside rubber-necking to see from the road. So eager was I to show off the flowers, I actually waved them down and called 'Come on in!' The enthusiasm of youth. Then, once the books came out and were well received, and more and more people came to see the garden, we understood that we could earn a decent living opening to the public. Not vast sums but more than enough to live on, to keep the garden going and to give substantial amounts to several charitable organizations."

Now, they are looking forward to changing their habit with

no regrets. With both of them reaching retirement age, it's simply time they feel, to keep their garden private and make it smaller. They have been able to do what they love, and support themselves financially from it.

"The response from visitors was always encouraging, and gave us an impetus to continue," says Lima. "I remember once

being very tired and discouraged, just one of those temporary fed-up feelings. I went into the garden shed and leafed through our guest book, and was really touched by what people had written, how much they appreciated the colour and beauty of the garden, how thankful they were that it was open. We learned how good-hearted people are, who are interested in plants, gardens and nature. Considering the thousands who have come through Larkwhistle, we have had two, maybe three run-ins with unreasonable folks."

### "Green" Concerns

After a career spent working with and writing about growing things, Lima has a strong observation for us.

"This culture is addicted to a destructive way of being," he notes, "the rapid extraction and use of natural resources in pursuit of maximum profits, leaving a toxic and blighted landscape in its wake. The planet is heating inexorably; the sun is scorching. Waterways are shrinking. Birds, fish and other creatures are diminishing and forests are ailing. Sadly, there is no pulling back. Endless economic growth is still trumpeted as the highest good and 'green' tinkering is held as a hopeful solution. This planet of such beauty, diversity and abundance is being wrecked in the cause of power, acquisitiveness and comfort. How misguided, how short-sighted, how very sad." **NEV**

**Larkwhistle, 191 Lindsay Rd. 40, Dyer's Bay 519.795.7763**

**Open to the public in 2013 from May 11 to Oct. 14, every Wed., Fri., Sat., Sun., 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission \$3 per person.**

### Books in print by Lima and Scanlan:

- ▶ *Herbs: A Complete Gardener's Guide*, Firefly Books, 2012 reissue from the 1986 original
- ▶ *The Kitchen Garden*, Five Rivers Chapmanry, 2011. Originally published by Key Porter Books, 1996.