

# Living in Harmony on a Large Country Property

Written & photographed by Sean James

I recently had the opportunity to design and build a landscape on a large country property and, even after all these years, the process offered a lot of lessons. Picture a man-made pond, created 150 years ago and naturalizing, untouched since then — a biodiversity jewel.

Now, in this case, we were a bit late on the scene and the customer had already had someone in to partially clear the land. Knowledge is key in all things and the plants and trees which were left were not necessarily the most ornamental, special (rare, flowering, good habitat etc.), or healthy. All of the woody understorey growth, the small trees and shrubs that need the shade of the larger trees, and in turn support them, to a degree, had been removed. At first it seemed pretty decent but we soon realized that some of the remaining trees had weak or damaged roots or were suffering from diseases. Many of the roots from the trees that were left were damaged. The biggest awakening came during a windstorm when we noticed the roots on several trees actually beginning to lift out of the ground! As you can imagine, this necessitated an emergency trip to the hardware store to purchase wires, clamps, hose and stakes to guy-wire the trees to save them until they can establish new, stronger roots.

## Thin Trees Carefully

Knowing that some of the trees are under stress also guided us to transplant some younger specimens under and around some of the older stands to



▲ The pink lady slipper orchid in the foreground lost all its shade and the trees lost the support of their neighbours, causing some to fall over.

help shelter them from wind and replace them as they pass on. It's also important to remember that as trees grow, if they start with the support and shelter of neighbouring trees, they'll rely on that throughout their life. Removing too many trees will result in the specimens on the edge of the stand falling over, one at a time — good to be aware of!

Pruning the remaining trees and large shrubs to bring out their form will also help the landscape fit into our ideals of beauty. Think about what the best views are that will need to be enhanced with pruning. It's not always the best route to simply limb trees up to get the view. Thinning out a few of the lower branches can create a veil to look through while preserving the health and structural integrity of the trees. Limbing a tree up too far means that the trunk of the tree will not have the necessary energy provided by nearby leaves. Over a few years the tree will decline, rot,

become weak, meaning that eventually the tree will need to be removed: a waste...and an expensive proposition.

Our next big lesson was about how folks think. What makes us see a man-made landscape as beautiful and a natural landscape as weedy? The answer is in how we mass plants, as opposed to the way Mother Nature scrambles them together. Massing allows us to see the beauty of each species separately. The jumble has its beauty too, and of course it's more resilient and less prone to pest breakouts since there's a better predator/prey relationship, but we seem to need to see a bit of control. I think of landscaping, to a degree, as "refereeing," helping Ma Nature look her very best, as it were. Use the existing plants as a guide to what will succeed in what areas.

## Rescue Plants

Take the time to walk a grid pattern, looking for special plants like orchids that might

need to be moved or worked around. If you must move something like an orchid, find another area where they're already doing well and mass them there. Perhaps try moving a couple first and see how they do over time. Generally, it's not advisable to move something like an orchid but compromises have to be made so we can live in harmony with nature but maintain the necessary usefulness and aesthetics.

Accordingly, with our project, we began by rescuing plants from some areas and massing them together in large drifts elsewhere. It will be a stylized version of nature — one with biodiversity, resilience, yet still with appeal to humans.

As always, when figuring out how to redesign, consider texture first. A balance of grassy, feathery and bold will make things look great. If you have the luxury, try to hold off from landscaping for a year so you can take the time to observe seasonal changes, fall colour, winter interest and even interactions with nature. This will allow you to design with more subtlety and success.

If you go slowly, with consideration, you'll have an enormous sense of accomplishment, a stunning property and years of enjoyment. You'll preserve the environment, keeping all the birds (remember, birds eat pests and weed seeds!) and the pollinator habitat necessary for the long-term success of our world.

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