

## **My Therapeutic Garden** by Gina Dobrodzicka

Soon after moving to Canada from Poland, I got seriously home-sick. Fortunately, a remedy was found quickly. It was occupational therapy: specifically, the creation of a garden filled with plants which I had known in Poland. I believed they would help me feel more at home. As a typical young adult, I didn't consider my lack of horticulture knowledge or my limited experience as problems and thought naively that my enthusiasm would overcome any difficulty.

From my childhood I remember city lawns covered with blooming crocuses. The spectacular show starts as early as the end of February when the Polish winter usually ends. That first fall in Ottawa, I started my Polish garden with crocuses by planting over 100 of these early classics. Nobody warned me about furry Canadian critters, unknown to a new immigrant from Europe. Not for long! The following April I watched helplessly while black squirrels fed on the sprouting crocuses. No deterrents worked, including my dog, so no crocuses survived "the massacre".

The other spring-bloomer that I strongly associated with Poland was the forsythia shrub. This large and hardy shrub seemed a perfect candidate to be the wind- and noise-barrier my property needed. The forsythia hedge was planted in October and I impatiently waited for a breathtaking, golden spring show. Instead of a cheerful, yellow spring opening I got some ugly winter souvenirs. Lots of brown droppings were left by the grateful rabbits that fed on juicy forsythia branches all winter long. When spring eventually arrived the deciduous hedge was almost non-existent.

I also tried some trees - I remember Polish streets shaded by rows of mountain ashes. The popularity of the mountain ash in my homeland can be compared with honey locusts and ashes here. My European mountain ash started nicely with clusters of snow-white flowers in May. I was overjoyed and awaited masses of showy coral-red berries. Then in June I noticed I wasn't the only one enjoying the mountain ash. Dozens of green caterpillars were feeding on the tree foliage. Despite my various efforts from hand-collecting to spraying, the caterpillars kept coming back, weakening the tree. Fire blight, a fatal bacterial disease, sealed the mountain ash's fate.

I hoped I would have more luck with an oak. Polish oak forests are known for their huge and magnificent trees. Most oaks grow massive and broadly rounded and seem too large for a city garden. My choice was 'Fastigiata', the English oak cultivar which is distinctly upright and columnar. However, as I learned later, oaks produce a tap root, dandelion-like but on a much larger scale. Therefore, they need deep soil to root well and show their enormous potential. A shallow layer of clay on bed-rock is all I could offer my oak. Obviously, it isn't grateful: growing at an extremely slow rate and fighting powdery mildew every year. According to my textbook, it can reach 20m, but I'm afraid not in my life-time.

Hollyhocks were my most favourite perennial. I've appreciated them since my early childhood as a great hiding spot during a hide and seek game. The beginning of my Canadian hollyhock affair was quite pleasant. As the germination rate was a great success I had enough seedlings to establish a plantation. The first disaster struck suddenly in June. The hollyhock beds looked as if they had been mowed. The disaster turned out to have four legs, brown fur and had just moved in under my deck. Before I persuaded the groundhog to move out, most of the hollyhocks had disappeared. The survivors were attacked by a fatal fungus, known as hollyhock rust.

My negative gardening experiences had a challenging effect. I enrolled in a college horticulture program and graduated with honours. Finally I was in a position to truly appreciate what I already had. I found wonderful substitutes for my unfortunate Polish experiments. Some trees were already growing in my garden unappreciated such as mature red maples and wild cherries. Others like the pagoda dogwoods were identified just in time to save them from a tree removal service. I also noticed the valuable groundcovers such as periwinkle and sweet woodruff. Some of my new favourites, like my beloved blue columbines, arrived unexpectedly and stayed. Now that I had become a Canadian gardener, I established my own landscape design company and joined a group of master gardeners.

Now every spring my garden turns vibrant blue with countless scilla which I admire and the squirrels ignore. This blue carpet goes very well with the delicate pink of red maple blossoms. Spectacular cherries and crabapples in bloom come to the stage next followed by breath-taking flowering pagoda dogwoods and fragrant lilacs. Most of the spring performers make an encore in the fall with handsome fruit or spectacular autumn colours. I also fell in love with some rewarding and undemanding perennials, such as ever-blooming cranesbills and ornamental grasses.

The outcome of my occupational therapy is debatable. Although the initial goal wasn't achieved, as I am still a bit home-sick and probably always will be, I think it was a success. The therapy brought unexpected but welcome side-effects such as a change of profession and some new friends. Last but not least is the garden which I created. Although, not as Polish as I envisioned, it is a source of joy and pride to me.

	<p><b><u>PLANT LIST</u></b></p> <p>Crocus (<i>Crocus</i> spp.)          Scilla, Siberian squill (<i>Scilla siberica</i>)          Forsythia (<i>Forsythia</i> spp.)          European mountain ash (<i>Sorbus aucuparia</i>)          Red maple (<i>Acer rubrum</i>)          English oak, truffle oak (<i>Quercus robur</i>)          Cherry (<i>Prunus</i> spp.)          Pagoda dogwood (<i>Cornus alternifolia</i>)          Crabapple (<i>Malus</i> spp.)          Lilac (<i>Syringa</i> spp.)</p>	<p>Periwinkle (<i>Vinca minor</i>)          Sweet woodruff (<i>Galium odoratum</i>)          Hollyhock (<i>Alcea rosea</i>)          European columbine, granny's bonnet columbine (<i>Aquilegia vulgaris</i>)          Cranesbill, perennial geranium (<i>Geranium</i> spp.)          Ornamental grasses:  <i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>, <i>Panicum</i> spp.,  <i>Calamagrostis</i> spp., <i>Helictotrichon</i> spp.  <i>Festuca</i> spp., <i>Pennisetum</i></p>
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*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gross Fontane' – Photo by Andrew Dobrodzicki

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- Crocus (*Crocus* spp.)
- Scilla, Siberian squill (*Scilla siberica*)
- Forsythia (*Forsythia* spp.)
- European mountain ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*)
- Red maple (*Acer rubrum*)
- English oak, truffle oak (*Quercus robur*)
- Cherry (*Prunus* spp.)
- Pagoda dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia*)
- Crabapple (*Malus* spp.)
- Lilac (*Syringa* spp.)
- Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*)
- Sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*)
- Hollyhock (*Alcea rosea*)
- European columbine, granny’s bonnet columbine (*Aquilegia vulgaris*)
- Cranesbill, perennial geranium (*Geranium* spp.)
- Ornamental grasses:  
*Miscanthus sinensis*, *Panicum* spp., *Calamagrostis* spp., *Helictotrichon* spp. *Festuca* spp., *Pennisetum* spp. etc.

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