

Naturalizing Muskoka one plant at a time

By JAKE GOOD

For more than 20 years landscape gardener Robert Allen has been making Muskoka a little more natural.

A graduate of the Niagara Parks Commission School of Horticulture in 1977, Allen returned to Muskoka and quickly became aware of the need for conscientious landscaping in Muskoka's unique environment.

"It was very difficult at first," he said. "We knew 20 years ago we wanted to start using plants native to the area in our designs but they were just not available."

He set up Northway Gardeners on Windermere Road on a 200 acre farm that was once used for dairy and beef. It is a picturesque corner with rolling hills and pastures, rather unlike most of Muskoka. Now instead of cattle, parts of the property have been transformed into a private garden centre housing an incredible array of native plants.

"About ten years ago people began to understand about the importance of using indigenous species," said Allen. "The garden centres picked this up and three or four years later native plants started to arrive. Garden centres are often behind certain trends as it takes them that long to successfully propagate the plants. When we first started and realized the plants we wanted were not available we tried to propagate them

ourselves. It was a totally different occupation. It didn't last long."

Allen gets his stock from about four of five different garden centres to make sure he has one of the best selections available. He also grows a lot of trees and shrubs from seedlings to make sure he has plants in different stages of growth for his designs. "It gives a project a natural look straight away," said Allen.

Allen walks through his nursery pointing out the wide variety of species from blueberries

People are getting the message about keeping Muskoka natural

to evergreens that are growing outside or in the three shade houses designed so the plants that grow in the shade can easily be transplanted.

"I don't even clip or prune them," he said. "I want them to look as nature intended."

Allen is on the natural heritage committee of the Muskoka Heritage Foundation and has worked on numerous shoreline restoration projects across the district. He has been the guest speaker at numerous lake association annual meetings and when nearby Three Mile Lake had an algae bloom in 2004 he was on hand to help residents prevent another one.

"After the work we put in to establish ourselves in Muskoka

it is always great when you get a call from a customer who wants to naturalize their property," said Allen. "It means the hard work has paid off and people are getting the message about how important it is to keep Muskoka natural. It is good to work with what we have, not what we can have."

Plants native to Muskoka help with drainage, water quality, erosion at the shoreline and create a habitat for all sorts of birds and animals. Native species are not the only plants Allen works with, though.

"There is a place in any design for Victorian plants," said Allen. "We try to use them as accents though. They are great for borders and window boxes but as the garden merges into nature that is where we like to introduce indigenous species."

With an abundance of plants and with Allen wanting to give the opportunity to the public to improve their properties, Northway Gardeners will be open for the first time to members of the public on the next two Saturdays (October 3 and 10) from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

"This is a good time of year to plant, added Allen. "Everything is about to go dormant and plants put in now will thrive when spring arrives."

Northway Gardeners can be found at 1493 Windermere Rd.



NATURAL GREEN THUMBS. Robert Allen from Northway Gardeners inspects some of the plants native to Muskoka he has in his nursery. Allen has been promoting using native plants for more than 20 years.

Photo by Jake Good