

## My Garden on Howe Island

by Nancy Archibald

Life without a garden was not an option. I moved with my husband, Bill, from a farm in Alberta to an acreage on Howe Island in the St. Lawrence River. We arranged a temporary stay at my sister's isolated cottage, arriving by the shore through a dusty lane and abandoned apple orchard.

A flat acreage among the agricultural landscape of Howe Island, with a clear view across the St. Lawrence River, called out to us. After driving by this acreage with a "for sale" sign in the front yard on the way to the ferry we took to and from work, we investigated.

August had arrived, and the lawn remained unmowed all summer. I had a push lawn mower we packed from Alberta. I was about to mow when our neighbour, Peter Higgs, came over with his rider mower.

"Hi, I'm Peter from down the road. I came up to help," Peter said.

"That's nice of you," I said, hardly believing my ears after the difficult time Bill and I had been through.

He said, "I've been wanting to get at this lawn all summer."

Peter finished mowing the entire area in two hours, which would have taken me three days. The only thing left to do was rake the windrows and make a compost pile of grass. I started on the front lawn on Saturday and finally finished Sunday afternoon, but it was worth it. At work the next day, I noticed my painful, swollen wrist and tendon made squeaky noises as I bent my wrist.

I had never lived on an island before. It had two ferries, one on each end of the fourteen-mile-long island. The wonderful red, orange and yellow leaves of oak and maple trees

along the shore of the dazzling blue St. Lawrence River mesmerized me as I sat and waited for the ferry to go to work and take my kids to hockey practice.

Autumn leaves blew off the trees, then snow and ice took over the landscape. Because the cable ferry operated constantly, it continued running, unlike the other ferry that closed for the winter. During the cold winter nights, I planned the garden I would plant in the spring.

*I have so much to do to make our acreage beautiful. Tulips would look nice, but I didn't plant the bulbs in the fall.*

When the snow had melted, I bought tulips from the nursery on the way home from work and planted them in our front flower garden. The tall stems stood straight, looking out of season. 'How could tulips have emerged so quickly?' a passerby may have thought.

During that spring, I planted new perennials and dug around the chive plants already in front of the house.

A neglected hawthorne hedge with grape vines grew along the south fence line. Untangling and removing the old dead branches took hours. The goal was a green, tidy hedge, not an old, gnarly one. When I snipped the branches and burned them in a fire pit in the backyard, I had to be careful because the thorns cut my arms and even punctured the tire of my wheelbarrow. The smell of the smoke permeated my hair and clothes.

Now it was time to plant my garden, but quack grass had taken the square plot of land that had been tilled for a garden over. Determined to make this a vegetable garden, I got down on my hands and knees with my trusty fork and dug at the hardened soil to remove the stubborn grass. It took two hours to go two feet across the garden. After a weekend of digging I planted lettuce, peas, carrots, potatoes and even tomatoes.

After enjoying the lettuce in the early summer, I watched the rest of the garden emerge.

That is when Bill elected for us to go on vacation in the Maritimes.

As I looked at my garden on the day we left, I worried about the fate of the vegetables. The carrots and potatoes would be ok, but the peas and tomatoes were in peril.

After a wonderful time sightseeing in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, I came back to my garden. Beautiful red tomatoes were being consumed by huge green caterpillars with antennas—the ones I had seen in cartoons. They were so cute, I couldn't smash them with a shovel.

*How am I going to get rid of these?*

An idea struck me. I got a plastic container, gathered them up, and put them in the microwave until they were cooked, then threw them in the garbage. That was the end of them!

One weekend in August, Bill's uncle Bill and his wife Audrey came from Hamilton to visit us. I happened to be mowing the lawn with the push mower when they arrived. My twelve-year-old son and I had been taking turns mowing all summer. The following week, Bill presented me with a rider lawn mower. I think his uncle may have put a word into his nephew's ear that it would be a good idea to buy me one.

We lived on the Island for four years. I loved the seasons, my garden, and the people I met. The ferry rides every day were a challenge in our busy life with two boys in hockey and work. Bill and I went our separate ways. I went back to Alberta to take my Master's of Nursing, and Bill moved to a cottage at Charleston Lake.

At first, my two boys and I lived in an apartment, but it wasn't long before we moved to a house in Calgary with a landscaped yard and a flower garden that had not been maintained for two summers. Another challenge awaited me.