

Sunday » May  
15 » 2005

## Oasis in a concrete jungle

### Condo owners love creating garden rooms on their balconies

**Jane Cardillo**

Freelance

*Saturday, May 14, 2005*

EDMONTON - On those blistering summer days when downtown streets are deserted for the relative cool of the suburbs, Brice Davidson finds sanctuary on his condo balcony overlooking a back alley in the heart of Edmonton's warehouse district.

With the sounds of the city as his backdrop, Davidson likes to stretch out on a favourite recliner, and cat nap amid the climbing vines and colourful flowering plants of his third-floor balcony garden.

Virginia creepers cling to the weathered brick walls of his outdoor space in the Phillips Lofts, an early 20th-century warehouse converted by Worthington Properties into stunning open living spaces on 104th Street near Jasper Avenue.

Wicker pots hold an array of brightly blooming annuals and leafy tropical house plants that Davidson moves outdoors for the summer. Ivies, palm trees and lillies share the space with dragon wing begonias, ferns and lacy-leafed coleus.

Davidson, who is president of the Downtown Edmonton Community Association and has training as a horticulturist, says his wife, Amy, loves their urban garden as much as he does.

"She likes to sit out there and enjoy the work that I put into it," Davidson says.

"It's just such a nice (feeling) listening to the sound of traffic. I find it very relaxing."

This little corner of Eden thriving in the shadow of concrete buildings and offering a haven of tranquility amidst the cacophony of rumbling buses and blaring horns, is proof indeed that a garden can grow just about anywhere.

All you need are some containers and a little imagination. A balcony garden "adds warmth and serenity to an environment," says Deborah Sirman, co-owner of Greenland Garden Centre.

"Compared to just concrete, as soon as you put plants in an environment you start feeling like it's a little garden room as opposed to just this stark area."

Container gardening has been popular for years. But these days, there's a shift in what people are planting in those containers. "People used to only put annuals in containers and now we're seeing a lot more perennials," Sirman says.

Among them are evergreens like dwarf Alberta Spruce and dwarf cedars. While they don't overwinter well in containers, they pack such a visual punch that some balcony gardeners are buying them anyway.

"On a balcony you don't have the garden, so it's nice to get those evergreens with height in there," Sirman says. "You'll pay \$50 for a dozen roses and they're gone in a week. So spend \$50 on a plant and you can use that for a good eight months."

The enjoyment plants provide is definitely worth the money, says Davidson who spends about \$200 on his balcony garden each year.

"How many movies would you see for that much?" he asks. "It gives me way more enjoyment and relaxation. I could go to 20 movies but I'd rather just spend it on my balcony."

Eileen Tobin and her husband Patrick live on the third floor of Wolf Willow Manor, an apartment-style condominium by the Challenge Group.

In the summer the couple like to sit at their patio table on the balcony, surrounded by flowering geraniums and petunias in white ceramic urns. They've even tried their luck at growing tomatoes.

"It's always nice to see plants during the summer and when we did have a house we had a garden, so I wanted to continue it," Eileen Tobin says. "I get a great deal of pleasure from it because I love flowers. It always looks very nice out there. It's not too small and we don't miss the yard."

The Tobins were pleasantly surprised by the size of their balcony which allows them to put out a number of pots and a plant stand along with their patio furniture.

Greg Christenson, president of Christenson Developments, says that in his multi-family buildings the size of a balcony matters.

"Balconies and outdoor space are really important to people who are moving into multi-family or condominiums," Christenson says. "The balcony is kind of an extension of their indoor space. Definitely people love to garden and look after some bedding plants."

Many new apartment-style buildings offer conveniences like barbecue and hose outlets on the balcony, Christenson says. And balconies are bigger than they used to be.

"Historically balconies were four and five feet deep (about 11/2 metres) and they were just kind of a decoration," he says. "But increasingly, we're making decks a minimum of eight, but more likely 10 feet deep because they actually need to represent a room."

A roomy balcony is sometimes what convinces people to leave their house and backyard for condo living, says Brooks Tanner, a sales representative with the Chateaux of Whitemud Ridge, an apartment-style building by Cove Properties.

"A lot of them are moving from houses and that's something they foresee that they'll be missing," Tanner says. "And so you show them a patio that's a little larger than most and it makes up for the fact that they don't have a backyard."

A backyard is certainly something Brice Davidson does not miss. "A lot of yards are just a lot of maintenance," Davidson says. "I don't view my balcony as maintenance. You can just sit there and drink coffee and sit back and pull off dead leaves."

"You're just sitting there relaxing. Every single minute of it is enjoyment for me."

© The Edmonton Journal 2005

CLOSE WINDOW

---

Copyright © 2005 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest Global Communications Corp. All rights reserved.  
Optimized for browser versions 4.0 and higher.

