

# REG PORTER

*"I asked my landlord if I could plant a few things"*

*Though he claims not to know much about plants, Reg Porter has taken hostas, ferns, daylilies, phlox and roses and deftly planted them among classical architectural elements in ways that are both playful and soothing. Neighborhood cats like the one below appreciate Reg's hidden "catacombs"*



This wasn't going to be a *real* garden, because I'm not a real gardener," says Reg Porter, whose profession (he teaches at the University of Prince Edward Island)—and chief passion in life—revolves around the history of art and architecture. Fifteen years ago, when he first rented his apartment, one of four in a large, old downtown Charlottetown house, the yard was a wilderness of asphalt, collapsed sheds, tree stumps and deep ruts commemorating a recent visit from a cement truck. It was depressing. "Ask your landlord to let you plant a few things," a landscaping friend suggested, and so, as Reg puts it, the odyssey began.

For a classical scholar the result—a *hortus conclusus*, or walled garden, its features lined up on a central axis in strict classical fashion—was inevitable, Reg supposes. The original plan was much simpler: just an outdoor room to extend the interior living spaces. But somehow, wherever an old Charlottetown building was being demolished, there was Reg with his truck, picking up a few column drums, an Ionic column capital, a fragment of molding. Most of the fragments have found their way into the garden, deployed in unexpected ways to create playful classical puns and sly Island references.

The central sitting area is a circular patio of Island-red brick with an inlaid edging of grey-green Nova Scotia sandstone (added after these photos were taken). Seated there, you face the main garden feature, a tall fountain inscribed with the Greek injunction to Know Thyself. On a side wall is Reg's tongue-in-cheek "temple" to the Roman emperor Hadrian, the *genius loci* or spirit of the place and a work-in-progress. Opposite Hadrian is the "mausoleum", with an 18th-century door, meant as a poke at his home province. "It's the door to Hades—symbolic of the hell through which Islanders throw everything that's wonderful about the Island," growls Reg, who takes a dim view of Islanders' penchant for knocking down old buildings.

In this garden several cats, those of his neighbors as well as Reg's own, come and go as they please, using the small cat door that leads to the "catacombs" under the house.

Although he insists he knows more about classical architecture (and cats) than about gardening, Reg excels at growing things. He tries to use only plants that would have been growing in the area by 1872, the date the house was built. Some may be modern varieties of old favorites, he says, while the majority are descendants of originals—especially the many he's rescued from dumps and abandoned farm sites. "The chief glory of my garden is the columbine season," he says, "from mid-June to mid-July. I have about 40, from pure white to crimsons so dark they're almost black. And not one is modern; they've all come from the woods, or from around some old house." ■





**EVERYTHING NEW IS OLD AGAIN IN REG PORTER'S GARDEN**

Since Reg Porter wanted his brick patio to lose its fresh-laid look as soon as possible, he collected cattle manure from a local farm, made it into a slurry with water, and painted it onto the bricks, allowing it to seep between the cracks. Within a couple of weeks, he says, green moss had taken root and the bricks were "aging" nicely.

Some of his garden ornaments, such as a lion's-head mask and the urns that adorn

his fountain, also looked too clean and new for a "classical" garden, and Reg wanted to give them a patina of age. Last year, he added an inlaid edging to his circular patio, and the mellow, grey-green Nova Scotia sandstone he used was exactly the color he needed to give his new ornaments a look of antiquity.

As he cut the stone, he carefully vacuumed up the stone dust, eventually gathering about three gallons (12

litres). Then he talked to people at the paint company Benjamin Moore, and they suggested mixing the stone dust one-to-one with a colorless version of their exterior penetrating latex stain. "It adhered really well," Reg says. He painted four coats on the ornaments, not only matching them to the sandstone edging and giving them an aged look, but also protecting them from the weather.

