

paradise found



A northern climate hasn't stopped one Montreal couple from creating a "tropical" hideaway—minus the dependence on water

EIGHT YEARS AGO, when Julie Jonas and Danny Roberge moved from bustling downtown Montreal to Beaconsfield, Quebec, a tranquil West Island community 20 minutes from the city, their combined gardening experience was zip. But the bugs seem to have changed all that.

From the home's previous owners they inherited 929 square metres of soggy turf that every June became ground zero for swarms of mosquitoes. "Our garden backs onto Angel Woods," explains Julie, referring to the stretch of swampy forest that is an exceptional ecosystem for rare flora and old-growth trees. It's also home to several endangered animal species such as raptors and owls. "The old garden was your typical patch of green grass edged with annuals and cedars," recalls Danny, who, with Julie, owns and operates an organic baked-goods company and a retail website for eco-chic products.

Although at the time the couple didn't know the term, their design and direction followed what is known as xeriscaping, a form of desert landscaping that focuses on simple, elegant gardens using plants that require very little water, fertilizer and, as it turns out, maintenance. An added bonus: fewer insects come the summer months. In addition to running two thriving businesses, they are parents to Zia, a sprightly five-year-old girl they adopted from China. "We don't have the time or energy to be constantly mowing, watering, deadheading and pruning," says Julie.

The backyard transformation began when Danny tore up all the turf and added truckloads of soil to raise the property several metres above the forest ground. Then came the rocks. Piles of them, from artfully arranged limestone

boulders that a contractor dug up while installing an in-ground pool to the flagstones Danny laid. Most noticeable, though, are the narrow beds of tiny, multicoloured river rocks that meander throughout the entire property. A focal point are two winding wooden paths Danny built leading to the heart of the garden, a Pagoda-style tea house overlooking the elegant pool that seems made to fit the space.

Encouraged by the noticeable reduction in bugs as soon as the sod and annuals were removed, Julie and Danny next hit their local nursery. They purchased a variety of hardy, ground-hugging perennials, including sandwort (*Arenaria* spp.), and dwarf mugo pines that are thriving in the long hours of direct sunlight their garden receives each day. To fill out the mix, they added fast-growing, drought-tolerant bushes ('Summersnow' spirea and weeping Siberian pea shrubs) as well as junipers and brandons (*Thuja occidentalis*), which have intertwining boughs that create a privacy screen around their property.

The rivers of pebbles serve as beds for waving bunches of blue fescue and blue oat grasses. Look down and you'll also see red patches of sedum and spiky, drought-tolerant perennials, such as yucca, that appear around the swimming pool. "I love the look of yucca and agave," says Julie. "It reminds me of when I lived in Jamaica and Panama."

Sitting with Zia in the open tea house on quiet (bug-free!) evenings, Julie and Danny often toy with the idea of escaping for a long weekend. "But we don't have to," says Julie, sitting back in a deck chair. "We've created our own all-inclusive resort right here on the West Island."

Look for these icons for Julie and Danny's guiding principles

reduce
& reuse

drought
tolerant

easy
care

bug
stop



at-a-glance

GARDENERS Julie Jonas and Danny Roberge

OCCUPATIONS owners of Skinnimini Edibles and Zia and Tia Pure Luxury Organics

LOCATION Beaconsfield, QC

CHILDREN daughter Zia, 5

PETS two cats, Kaia and Malia, and Jenna, a standard white poodle

YEARS IN HOUSE 8

SIZE 929 square metres

ORIENTATION east

CONDITIONS full sun

GARDENING SEASON May to October

ZONE 5a

GARDEN FOCUS Asian influences with mainly drought-tolerant perennials

easy
care

time savers

Low-maintenance ideas make upkeep simple.

- 1 Develop a strong template. Julie and Danny's well-planned layout means they don't need to "reinvent the wheel" each year.
- 2 Permanently anchor big

pots for annuals (such as the papyrus and coleus seen here). Just add tufts of shade grass (*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola') and stones for accents.

- 3 Overwinter annuals if you can. Julie keeps the papyrus inside during the cold months, then replants them each spring.





easy
care

Spare plantings of drought-tolerant materials surround the pool. “Architecturally, I love aloe vera and agave—it reminds me of when I lived in Jamaica and Panama,” says Julie, who, for years, was part owner of a scuba diving business. “But we can’t grow them this far north. The Adam’s needle (*Yucca filamentosa*) is the closest we could get.” Contrasting shades of greenery add visual texture to xeriscaping’s traditional monochromatic palette.

“We couldn’t afford to hire professional landscapers or and photo albums from our trips to China and the



Tidy blue oat grass and yucca plants (left) are super low maintenance, requiring virtually no pruning or trimming to keep them in shape.

drought tolerant **less is more**

If you live in a dry climate or simply want to save water, time and money, consider the principles of xeriscaping. Sara Williams, a Saskatoon-based garden expert and author of *Creating the Prairie Xeriscape*, offers tips on how to best care for your dry plant kingdom.

1 Group plants with similar

- moisture needs together to conserve water use.
- 2** Give plants a deep soaking once every week or two and avoid frequent shallow waterings.
- 3** Use organic mulch to prevent evaporation after irrigation and help soil retain water. “Mulch made from plastic and recycled tires just doesn’t cut it!” she says.
- 4** Set plants in shallow wells or dips in the ground

and terrace off slopes to prevent water runoff.

- 5** While some xeriscaping experts say “Go native!” Williams demurs. “You have to be very careful with native plants; some are well behaved, drought tolerant and adaptable. Others can be invasive or simply die off depending on the conditions.” Instead, she says to choose regionally appropriate plants (in terms of hardiness).

reduce & reuse **second chances**

“Recycling can actually create a pile of even more junk all made from recycled materials,” says Julie. “Instead, try to find creative ways to reuse things you have lying around the house.” Julie and Danny offer some tips.

- 1** Turn wooden palettes (used by Julie and Danny to transport their baked

architects,” says Julie, “so we pored over travel books Caribbean, then sketched out what we wanted.”



This 10-metre wooden path takes Zia, 5, to her favourite spot in the garden, the tea house. The only maintenance the path requires is an occasional sweeping to remove leaves in the fall.

easy
care

goods) into planks for garden paths.

2 Repurpose garbage-bound items into garden accents. Danny inventively took a bamboo mat destined for the garbage and broke it apart to create a screen to hide pool equipment. The screen, which hangs in the window of the open tea house, helps block out the intense midday sun.

3 Divide existing grasses

and replant them in pots or in other sections of your garden rather than buying expensive new specimens.

bug stop pest control

Living beside Angel Woods, Julie and Danny have had to hold mosquitoes at bay using a creative approach. Here's how you can do it.

1 Remove every inch of lawn and pour river stones

and mulch into planting beds. Mulch is provided free of charge by the Town of Beaconsfield (check with your hometown for similar services).

2 Introduce flagstones in areas once covered by grass. This is a decorative yet practical way to create a drier microclimate.

3 Install a bat house in the back garden big enough to accommodate 100 mosquito-munching females.

4 Do away with all bird-baths. Mosquito larvae can grow in even small amounts of stagnant water.

5 Hardscape around your pool with coloured cement and add wooden paths to help create a drier microclimate.

6 Add drought-tolerant plants that thrive through the natural rain cycles to help deter bugs that tend to gravitate to more fragile, succulent varieties. ::