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OPINION

Want the perfect pandemic garden? Get in touch with Kyle and Tessa

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The perfect pandemic project for Kyle and Tessa Slote and their three kids has been making a non-contact garden.

For 11 years, they concentrated on renovating and restoring their 1888 home in the Durand Neighbourhood. This spring, they took on the front yard garden.

“We even put the kids (eight-year-old twin boys and five-year-old daughter) to work, making a plant list and choosing quantities, it was part of their distance learning,” Slote says.



The family proceeded carefully, doing the work with little face-to-face contact. They hired Hamilton landscape designer Candy Venning of Venni Gardens: Landscape Design do a plan which was delivered by email. “We never actually met,” Slote says.

Though the yard is small, about 24 feet wide by 10 feet deep, the size doesn’t diminish its impact.

“The key to a small garden is longevity without overwhelming with too many plants. This is always best served by foliage interest and contrast vs actual flowers,” Venning says.

With photos, and measurements supplied by Slote, the garden was designed by Venning (vennigardens.com) through her ‘one hour garden plan’. The quick turnaround for these \$150 garden design sketches, Venning says, has been a fantastic source of income during COVID-19. “It has allowed me to donate to my favourite charities.”

Though Slote is an architect with TCA (Thier + Curran Architects Inc.), he considered a career in landscape architecture and had a framework in mind for the garden.

“Our only requirements were no grass, some formal elements such as hedges, and some Japanese Forest Grass (we saw it last summer in the RBG rock garden and loved it).”

For structure, Venning suggested a boxwood hedge along the base of the front porch, and a yew hedge bordering the front walk and adjoining property. She never uses aggressive ground covers, choosing perennials for diversity and foliage interest. The Slote garden was planted in drifts of Japanese anemones, Jack Frost brunnera, heuchera and lysimachia. Solomon’s Seal and columbines were transplanted from the backyard. The plants were ordered from Connon Nurseries, using their thorough online catalogue (plants.connon.ca).

Urban front yard gardens exist in a bit of a war zone. Road salt is a peril, and devil-may-care dogs show no respect for plants.



To establish a no-pee zone, Slote installed blocks of sawn brown stone, 600 lbs in all, sourced from Hamilton Builder's Supply. He decided not to edge the whole garden in stone, feeling it would be too stiff looking. So one corner is edged in stone, the other corner abutting the sidewalk is protected by a low fence Slote devised of aircraft wire attached to small wooden posts. Pea gravel acts as a mulch around a planting of the durable Angelina stonecrop. The barriers Venning says make it more unlikely for a dog to stray into the garden.

With the whole family pitching in, taking out grass, digging in new soil and planting, the garden took about a month to complete from start to finish. Slote's goal was to shop local and keep expenses down by making much of it a do-it-yourself project.



While young gardens tend to look sparse, this one because of its hedges, and stone already has a personality and provides a proper welcome for the Slote's handsome house. In the fall spring bulbs will be planted, with an emphasis on crocus, muscari and species tulips-bulbs that will blend more easily with emerging perennials. Then it will be mulched for the winter.

The new garden has prompted more sidewalk chats with neighbours and has added another benefit.

"We use the porch more," Slote says. "In early evening when the traffic dies down, and the kids are in bed, we have tea and read."

A pandemic project with a long term payoff.