

Landscape Ontario Podcast: Rodger Tschanz

Host: Karina Sinclair

Guest: Rodger Tschanz

Karina Sinclair: Welcome to the Landscape Ontario Podcast. I'm your host, Karina Sinclair.

If you've ever visited the Landscape Ontario head office in Milton, Ontario, I hope you've taken the opportunity to wander around the Trial Gardens planted around the property. The large front garden, between the main building and Highway 401, features hundreds of full-sun annuals, growing in the landscape **and** in containers. You'll also find perennials, woody shrubs and other special trials planted around the property. Lots of breeders are represented, including [Proven Winners](#), [Ball Horticultural](#), [Dummen Orange](#), [PanAmerican Seed](#), [Danziger](#) and more. It's all worth a wander...I consider it a great way to build a shopping list for next year's garden beds.

Although the garden flexes its full flower power from July to September, I've personally seen vibrant blooms in the trial garden into mid-November. If you don't believe me, check out the [Plants with Lingerin Fall Colour](#) video we have on YouTube. And when the LO landscape is covered in snow, there are still beautiful textures from seed pods, branches, or blooms left to over-winter.

None of this happens by accident. Today we're going to talk to Rodger Tschanz, the wizard behind this gorgeous garden. Not only is Rodger a greenhouse technician and lecturer at University of Guelph, he's been managing the Trial Gardens since they started around 2006. Rodger is going to share his insights on the top 2023 trial performers, and just in time for winter, we'll explore what plants "look good dead." Dun dun duhhhh.

But first, a word from our sponsor.

SPONSOR:

Do you have your tickets for [Landscape Ontario Congress](#) yet? Congress is Canada's largest and longest running trade show and conference for landscape professionals. With over 400 exhibitors covering more than 8 acres, Congress is 3 days of discovering new products, learning new skills, and networking with not only trusted leading brands, but exciting up-and-coming businesses as well.

Our media sponsor, Landscape Trades magazine, would like to invite you to Congress. Stay tuned to the end of the episode for a VIP promo code.

Music Interlude

INTERVIEW:

Karina: Thanks for joining the Landscape Ontario podcast again, Roger. Now our audience members know that you're no stranger to the LO community. The last time you were on the podcast was in 2020, but you've also starred in several videos about the Trial Gardens, including [a series we produced together in 2022](#). I'm delighted to connect with you again today to talk about the highlights from the 2023 Trial Garden at the LO head office in Milton.

So once again, welcome to the show.

Rodger Tschanz: Thanks a lot, Karina. It's great to be here.

Karina: Why does Landscape Ontario have a trial garden at their head office? What's the purpose?

Rodger: Well, that's a good question. We started the trials, you know, from my perspective, I was looking for another location to trial plants. I guess in the science world we have replicates. So it's nice to plant plants in a variety of different locations under different growing conditions to see how well they do in those different conditions. So my first trials were at the [Guelph Turfgrass Institute](#) in Guelph, right beside the university, and the opportunity came along when talking to the folks at Landscape Ontario about whether they would be interested in having a trial garden.

And the answer was a resounding yes. So we started off small, putting in beds between the 401 and the building at the Landscape Ontario office, and I guess we haven't looked back. Every year it's grown. We started off with the annuals and now of course, we have perennials and from time to time we've had roses and we had other shrubs such as hydrangeas in the trials.

So having these multiple locations gives us an opportunity to, like I say, grow under different conditions of the soil and the landscape material side is pretty heavy and clay like it's more of a sandy loam soil at the Guelph site. And in addition to having these different growing conditions, having different trial sites allows different groups of stakeholders to visit the trials.

The head office for Landscape Ontario gets a lot of industry professionals visiting on a regular basis, and during the growing season, those same visitors can avail themselves of the trial gardens and wander around and see what's looking good at any particular time and during the growing season.

Karina: Are there any particular unique challenges or highlights to the Milton site? Did you have any severe weather or pests that you had to deal with in the past year?

Rodger: Yeah, this year was interesting. I think anybody who gardens can say, you know, there seems to be something unusual happening and I found this year to be exceptionally wet. I know that's hard to say to other listeners in Canada where this was such a dry year and an exceptional forest fire year, and then we had too much water, almost every other day.

It seemed to be raining in July and August, so the soils were very wet, lots of rain washing fertilizer out of containers. And so the nutritional level was seemed to be low and we had to supplement that a little bit more than we would have if we hadn't had so much rain. But on the plus side, you know, if the roots were waterlogged, a lot of plants did very well.

And as long as the soils were well drained, they really appreciated the extra water. So it was just a combination of things. I found certain plants didn't like the wet, others seemed to thrive in it. So that's what my memory of the growing season was like.

Karina: And to contrast, I remember last year was really hot at the Milton location, and July had a scorching start that a lot of the plants took a little bit to find their stride with all that heat that we had. But it's probably a good thing that there's challenges and stressors because otherwise, how do you know how well these plants would do in homeowner's landscape? Because it's not always perfect.

Rodger: That's right. And I think what I noticed this year, especially having multiple trials sites, we also have a trial site at the Royal Botanical Gardens, so there's like three different locations. And some plants did better than certain locations. And in others, even though we all probably had the same amount of rain, certain soils were maybe more forgiving than others for that rain.

Karina: So you must see some really exciting new products coming out. And I know that you start caring for the cuttings and the seeds in your greenhouse at University of Guelph as early as March. So after seeing this year's selection and seeing how well it performed in the landscape or in your containers, tell me about some of the plants that impressed you the most.

Rodger: So that's a big question. Yeah.

Karina: It's like asking you to name your favourite child.

Rodger: Yes. Okay. So, some of the ones are just off the top of my head, and by all means, this is not necessarily a comprehensive list because there are so many. But these may be plants that I've just been looking at recently that that jumped the mind that I really liked. And one, for example, is this new series of Cuphia from PanAmerican Seed. And I've spent a lot of time with that plant this year for a number of reasons, trying to maybe grow it for special events or whatever. And I guess it all started by seeing this particular plant in California and hearing the marketing blurb from the company, talking about this pollinator friendly plant that everybody needs to grow. So I was very excited that in my seed packs coming from PanAmerican Seed, I had this this Cuphia Sweet Talk series and we planted it out and it grew and it turned into a real winner as far as bloom and as far as pollinator friendliness.

It's, you know, it grows to maybe 30 centimetres to 45 centimetres in height by the end of the season. It's really bushy. And we have three different colours, you know, reds and roses and a lavender. And yeah, the bees are all over it. And we still haven't had a hard frost yet in southern Ontario, and it's still doing well. It's really stood up well in the landscape and is still providing food for pollinators and it's still looking very attractive as an ornamental.

That's one. I could talk about Petunias for quite some time here, but there's one that stands out. It's a series --- it stands out for being really, really small. The flower diameter is similar to that of a Calibrachoa or even smaller. But it's a Petunia and it's got a really interesting name called Itsy. It's an Itsy series. And I know of at least three colours that are in the Itsy series, like a pink and white and a violet colour. And it's just a really delicate flower. Very small flower that can grow in places that Calibrachoa can't. It's a little bit more able to handle or more forgiving of higher pHs in the soil, whereas Calibrachoa requires more of an acidic soil to do well.

Petunias are more forgiving of that and then so you can grow this in the landscape, you can grow in containers, but just the flower diameter is so small you could use it as a filler and a mixed container, or you could just grow it on its own as these small little flowers. So that's kind of fun.

Karina: That's really interesting because you would think that with Petunias, for a while, the trend was bigger, showier blossoms that would fill in a lot of space with colour. And here there's an option that's much smaller. I wonder what it was that made them decide to try that different diameter.

Rodger: Well, I can't really speak for the breeders, but you know, from my own perspective, a small Petunia flower is going to stand up better to pounding rains because there's less surface area to be hit by a heavy rainstorm. One of the things I am always aware of, especially after a thunderstorm, is how do the Petunias look afterwards? Have they stood up well because some of them seem to take days to recover from a pounding rain. So if you have something that bounces back very quickly, for whatever reason, it's got a really stiff petal or it's just a small surface area, then to me that makes a lot of sense for being a very resilient and useful and adaptable type of ornamental.

Karina: Yeah, I could see that being useful for all of our designers and softscapers to be able to identify something that's really resilient. What else did you find and fall in love with in the garden this year?

Rodger: I always love Begonias. Begonias are again a very adaptable plant. We think of fibrous Begonias as a shade plant, you know, but these wax Begonias, they can handle full sun and shade. Over the years we've had a whole range of different ones, different sizes and everything. And in recent years the breeders seem to be coming up with bigger versions.

And there's one series from [Benary](#) called Big, and it was big. And then we have Megawatt and Whopper and really very descriptive series names that serve to describe these really big Begonias that look really great in the landscape.

So that's sort of the background to this one that I saw in California and then was able to grow it here in Ontario and it's a series called Stonehedge, the name obviously came from or is inspired by Stonehenge in England and Stonehedge is a very -- it's bigger than Whopper. It's bigger than Big and just offers a really great presence in the landscape. So here's another plant that you can use in sun or in shade, but it's going to fill up and create some height and big spread that some of the other Begonias wouldn't.

So that's one that jumps out. Another Begonia, and this one's definitely for the shade, it's a tuberous type of Begonia from cuttings, and it's called MOVE2 Salmon Splash. And what I like about this, it's double flower, but it's got salmony coloured flower with white splashes on it and it just draws your eye in having these white blotches in amongst the salmony petals. I grew it in a variety of different conditions, and it just seems to be really adaptable to containers or in the landscape. So it's always nice to see a plant that seems to grow everywhere.

Another, I guess I call it a breeding breakthrough came from PanAmerican Seed this year is with the release of Petchoa. It's a new intergeneric cross between Petunia and Calibrachoa. And what's kind of interesting about that, a number of companies have produced plants of this cross and they seem to have really good rain tolerance and everything, and they don't have any of the nasty characteristics associated with Petunias like stickiness. Calibrachoa isn't quite as sticky. The other interesting thing about this cross, intergeneric is the fact that you're introducing some of the colours that are available from Calibrachoa into Petunia bloodlines. So it gives you the best of both worlds, or at least that is the hope in in doing such a cross.

There's a new series out from [Selecta One](#) called EnViva. These plants are vegetatively propagated and are this cross between Petunia and Calibrachoa. But what I really want to focus on because of its uniqueness, is a seed Petchoa that has been released by PanAmerican Seed. It's called the Caliburst Yellow, and it's the very first Petchoa where you can buy seed and produce it. So there's only one colour available right now, but they're hoping that more colours will come down the pipes.

Karina: That sounds very exciting. Now, those are all annuals that you've just listed.

Rodger: Yeah, the annuals we evaluate for one season, the perennials we evaluate for over three seasons in the garden. Many of those new perennials that we are trialing do behave like annuals. Certainly in their first year when you put them out in the garden. I'm just amazed by how many of them seem to have a very long bloom period and almost bloom like annuals with that season long bloom period.

But then, you know, I always wonder if something's going to bloom that hard that first year, will it make it through? Will it still have enough energy to make it through the winter and and bloom again the second year? And so we have quite a few plants, the perennial trials growing.

We are really quite excited by the number of plants we have in that trial. And this year we actually planted a new perennial trial with a focus on Echinacea and we have over 40 different Echinacea cultivars in that trial. And so this year, I mean, they're still blooming, they're still looking nice. But, you know, you don't get the true height of those plants until maybe the second year. But they're all very compact looking. And it will be interesting to see what the final height is on all these different Echinacea in the subsequent years.

Karina: Last year we had noticed different cultivars of Penstemon. One stood up very well to the winter snow load and one was virtually flattened to the ground. Have they recovered or did they just continue to perform the same?

Rodger: Yeah. So. So those Penstamon, one was Dakota Burgundy, I believe. That was the one that had seemed to stand up and had a sturdier stalk and seemed to stand up through the winter while while its neighbour did flop down. And so both of those plants came back alright.

It's just what do the stalks look like in in the winter time? And I guess I've taken this idea of what looks good when it's dormant or what looks good when it's dead from Piet Oudolf, the renowned Dutch designer who sort of made me aware or his thoughts made me aware of, yeah, we have such a short gardening season in Canada and we remove all those dead stalks for the winter and just leave this barren landscape. Or do we leave some of that stuff so that'll be maybe some habitat for overwintering insects or a support for a bird out looking for some food, you know, a place for it to rest while it surveys the landscape. So those are kind of interesting things that occurred to me that as as my gardening career has progressed, and my attitudes towards certain things have changed,

I think of us as gardening for for the creating little mini ecosystems in our yards or our gardens and creating as much diversity as possible and creating opportunities for diversity and flora and fauna, right? So sometimes now when I when I'm looking at all those perennials that we evaluate, we leave the stalks in for the winter. We don't do a fall cleanup, we do a spring cleanup, but we don't do a fall cleanup. And it's kind of interesting to see what still has some ornamental value throughout the winter and spring and fall and, like that Penstamon, with the interesting seed pods on top of those stems, it was quite, quite ornamental.

I may have some other plants that the stalks will persist, but maybe not as ornamental. I think of Hardy Hibiscus. You've got these bare wooden sticks, they stand up for the winter, but I'm not sure how attractive they are. And I guess a lot of this is going to be in the eye of the beholder too. What textures are you looking for? What really appeals to you?

I've had some Agastache, which is a really nice perennial, a very pollinator, friendly perennial, standing up very well through the winters. They have nice seed pods on them. They look nice, but you have all the dense, dense range of stalks that actually act like a snow fence in some ways. And they really look good coming through the winter.

Of course, years ago we did a hydrangea trial and there's certain hydrangeas that stand up very well to the winter, probably in a paniculata species. And those flower heads, the fluorescence persists.

I don't have the data in front of me right now, but when we did the Rose trial, there were certain roses that have really beautiful rose hips that really stood out against the snow, you know, really nice contrasting colours that stood out well, that I think should stay there and add to the interest in the winter.

But of course, the reality is the landscape industry, you're expected to do certain things. Your customers have certain desires and wants for what their landscape should look like or you may have labour issues. You know, "I have time now in the fall to do a clean up. I won't in the spring." So these things all affect why fall cleanups are done or why certain things are done differently than maybe I would do it given the freedom of my research or given the freedom of my own backyard gardening habits.

Karina: I think there's an opportunity to realign our definition of beauty and the esthetics that we've come to expect from things being very orderly and trimmed back. But when there's something that's a little bit wild left for, like you mentioned earlier, for a bird to land to survey the grounds around it, that's a beautiful image that we could support just by leaving a few things up and not cutting it back quite yet.

Rodger: Yeah, that that seems to be where I'm heading in my own gardening style. I think we need to, as 21st century gardeners, be aware of these things and just open our minds to different ways of doing things. And so I'll just leave it at that.

Karina: I'm sure that is a whole other topic for a podcast another day. Are there any other highlights from this year's garden that you think are deserving of a little shout out?

Rodger: Well, I just think of one other, Karina. We did a little trial with the World Wildlife Foundation. Talk about thinking outside the box. It was suggested to us to grow wildflowers in containers. And if you can imagine someone in downtown Toronto or somewhere someone in an urban area without a yard, but maybe a balcony, maybe some outside place, and you're wanting to create some habitat for native insects others.

First of all, what species of wildflowers would look good in these containers? And secondly, would they overwinter in the containers? Now, the containers that we use for this trial were fabric bags supplied by the World Wildlife Foundation. You know, I'm still working on analyzing the data for a report, but it's kind of interesting to see how many of these plants actually came through very well.

We didn't really offer any protection to these containers. We just put them side by side and they were out in the open near the 401, and just let them sit there all winter. And one thing I kind of noticed about these fabric bags is that they didn't seem to get near as wet as some plants in plastic pots, and the plastic pot would retain water in them, which would be frozen.

And so you have more of this freezing thawing happening around the crown of the plant. And I believe that there's that that was detrimental to the winter survival of some of the perennials in those plastic pods, whereas I didn't see the flooding and the freezing and thawing near as evident in the fabric containers. So that may be one reason for the good survival of these plants as well.

So this is sort of early stages and we went through one winter. We'll be trying it again this year. And I just think that has potential for adding some diversity and otherwise urban hard scapes for the cities.

Karina: I think that's a really exciting idea to be able to bring the meadows and the wildlands to a downtown location and soften all of that grey that big cities are drowning in.

So you've certainly given us a lot to think about. The trial garden sounds like it's had a really fantastic year. But I know you're not only a trial garden manager, you're also a lecturer and the greenhouse technician at the University of Guelph. Tell me a little bit about how do you find working with these young people coming into the horticulture profession, university students, high school students and these volunteers who you help fall in love with the green trades?

Rodger: Okay, That's a that's a good question, Karina. Personally I find it invigorating to be able to talk to a new generation of people and try to make them aware of maybe a career choice they've never, ever considered before. And when when I talked to high school students, I would say a lot of them never considered growing plants, whether it's in a greenhouse or in the landscape. Never considered that as a career option maybe, and to be aware of of the variety of plants. Certainly when I give tours to our tropical greenhouse on campus and to just expose the students to such a wide range of different plant material, I think that's exciting for them and gets them thinking. And then we also give tours to show them some of the plant research that we're doing.

And again, I think that opens their eyes and certainly some of them over the years have decided to go into some plant related field because of that tour.

As you mentioned, I'm teaching a course and it's not surprising it's focuses on annuals, perennials and indoor plants and their uses and these are university students who have already more or less decided on what they're going to do. And they've made it one career choice anyway. And then training in that direction. And some of them are landscape architect students, some are horticultural students, others are taking the course simply because of their love of plants. They are coming from a wide range of backgrounds and may have some preconceived ideas of ornamental horticulture and what one should do with it. So I just try to give them different ideas, different perspectives on that.

And it's always rewarding when somebody may come back and visit me a few years later and explain it or talk about how that has impacted them. So those are examples of some of the interactions I have with maybe two different age groups. And then we sometimes get volunteers working with us who could be older people who have been through a career and are retired and are volunteering in our facilities and are bringing their life long experiences to the job. And maybe they don't have a garden anymore. Maybe they're living in an apartment and here's an opportunity to stay connected with plants and growing. And so it's well, I don't know if it's formally horticultural therapy, but working with plants I think is always therapeutic in some way and makes you feel good in the end.

Karina: The way you generously share your knowledge would be very inspiring. Obviously I'm a fan.

Rodger: Thanks Karina.

Karina: So just the last thing I want to touch on that I hadn't thought of before, but you're talking about teaching this class that also incorporates houseplants, interiorscaping. As we're leading into winter, there's less time to be spent outdoors. A lot of Canada is about to be a little too cold to be tending gardens outside.

What's the opportunity in interior plants to help people stay connected to the earth and to the love of horticulture? And how can landscapers help with that?

Rodger: Let me give you an example of a project I'm involved with on campus, and I find it very inspiring, just the whole idea of growing plants indoors and human health and student health.

The project on campus associated with our student wellness centre, and basically we're going to be creating a tunnel that's going to be indoors in this very bright foyer that's going to have shelves of plants on it. And people walk into this tunnel and sit down and there's seating inside.

But you're surrounded by living plant material right? I'm involved in maybe suggesting and helping to grow some of the plants that will go into this structure.

And everybody we talk to about that, first of all, just glows when they hear about it. And it's just such a such a really neat idea to imagine, you know, you're sitting in a waiting room, maybe waiting to go to a doctor's office or sitting there and being in this environment. It's not built yet, but it's going to be coming hopefully before Christmas and the installation will be very exciting.

So I think we can create with an indoor environment some really interesting spaces. Selecting the right plants for the right location is very important with indoor locations, of course, but just having those living plants in those environments I think can bring a little bit of outdoors, indoors, I think, and just bring the benefit of gardening to the indoor environment and the wellness that's associated with that.

Karina: What a great opportunity for designers and landscapers who have a bit of a pause in the cold season that they could bring their knowledge and esthetics indoors to create those wellness spaces. I love that idea and I hope that we'll be able to share some photos and more information about that in the [Landscape Ontario magazines](#).

Rodger: Very good.

Karina: Roger, thank you for generously sharing your insights on the trial gardens this year. Some of your favourites. I always think of the trial garden as a bit of a shopping list, right? You can go in there and see all kinds of things that will inspire you for next year's garden and the colours and the textures and the heights and the blooms and everything that you've got in that trial garden just sings.

And for anybody who has the chance, make sure you go Landscape Ontario's headquarters and check that out during the growing season. It's gorgeous.

Thank you again for joining me today. I really appreciate that you made the time to speak with our audience.

Rodger: Thanks a lot, Karina. It's been a pleasure.

Music Interlude

I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Rodger Tschanz. Now that you know a little more about the trial gardens at Landscape Ontario, make it a destination and see it in person so you can be on top of trends and plan new garden beds for your clients next year.

For your reference, we'll have a full transcription and relevant links for today's interview on this episode's web page at landscapeontario.com/podcast.

Don't forget that registration for Landscape Ontario Congress is now open. Congress is a one-stop-shop for the latest equipment, tools, materials and supplies; everything you need to do what you do best.

Our media sponsor, Landscape Trades magazine, would like to invite you to Congress. Go to locongress.com to register and use the VIP promo code: LTLOC24 for free passes to the full trade show experience, including the LIVE stage, student gardens, and the tailgate party. Again that VIP promo code is LTLOC24. Be sure to drop by the Landscape Trades booth for free magazines and pitch your story ideas.

Thank you so much for listening to the Landscape Ontario podcast. We talk to all kinds of innovative and knowledgeable landscape professionals, so be sure to subscribe to catch new episodes for inspiration every month.

Resources mentioned in this episode

[Proven Winners](#)

[Ball Horticultural](#)

[Dummen Orange](#)

[PanAmerican Seed](#)

[Danziger](#)

[Benary](#)

[Selecta One](#)

[Guelph Turfgrass Institute](#)

[Landscape Ontario Congress 2024](#)

Video: [Plants with Lingering Fall Colour](#)