



Creating Super Shelterbelts

Naturally Native Trees & Shrubs

By Pam Asheton

Pam and Ken Wright are extremely dangerous. An unassuming couple, wide smiles always, always somehow making time with casual ease.

Nonchalantly, they swing into action. First they show you a little plant there, a recent combination idea for another shelterbelt. Then they point out a resident owl who's just recently returned. Then the countless hawks who comfortably

soar in great arches above this unique 18-acre nursery.

Bow Point Nursery is clocking up 24 years in 2012, its unique shelterbelts well established, gardens filled with row after row of shrubs and small trees (no irriga-

tion—ever—just mulching). There are larger bushes too, along with every conceivable kind of fruit-bearing local vine and plant. The air is thick with birdsong and droning honeybees.

You walk along mature, lush shelterbelt beds, multilayered and closely stacked. In spring, they're riots of colour that bulge outwards in wayward forms, thick with mulching. You notice how temper-

The couple are always fiddling, adapting new-found species of grass, and putting together different combinations of shrubs and trees for younger, newer shelterbelts



The Wright's lush shelterbelt photographed in different seasons. Says Pam, "I design shelterbelts to be successional, something new planted every 20 years or so."

atures and wind protection alter, and significantly so.

It's doubtful that you'll manage to walk away empty-handed from Bow Point. You'll hear how they gathered their original dogwood from a source near Cochrane, and tested its hardiness for eight years (their lodestar test landmarking) before

releasing its simple spring blossoms and unique bark into public domain. A few unique Ponderosa pines, just shaping up nicely now, are admirably pointed out—and then an arm swings out towards thin pencils of birch and poplar.

Pam and Ken Wright just want you to be as interested and knowl-

edgable as they have become of Alberta's treasure trove of drought-resistant native plants.

The couple came northwards into Alberta from Montana State University. Ken waves a copy of *Plants and the Blackfoot*, while Kathleen Wilkinson's *Trees and Shrubs* perches perilously close to

Restoring the Right of Way

A very serious challenge the Wrights have undertaken these last few years is the harvesting of seed in areas soon to be cleared for pipelines. One such stretch was in Jasper National Park running through to Mt Robson—17.5 kilometres of unique habitat.

Reseeding with grass is ruinous, says Pam. It just chokes everything else out. Instead, they harvested cones and seeds of juniper, cinquefoil, shrubs, and nearby trees. Hired by Tera Environmental (and Dave Novak), they collected more than 100,000 seeds and plants of individual species throughout October in 2008 and 2009.

Garbed in bright vests, the couple watched as bulldozers razed mature trees; seconds later, there they were, gathering the cones. They use fireweed as ground cover, a natural solution for disturbed soil. "The first thing down (a pipeline) is what it becomes," says Pam. "So you might as well plant a tree." More of these projects are, literally, in the pipeline.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WRIGHT FAMILY



the edge of a mammoth work table. Nearby, lies their own personal form of bible: a 1959 first edition of *Flora of Alberta*.

“My parents gardened. They were at Great Falls, Montana, a typical prairie town,” Ken says with a thoughtful smile. “They’d grow vegetables, huge yellow melons, pumpkins, and huge poplars, paintbrush for pollinating, and a huge herb garden.”

By then, Ken was working for the area’s Valley Nursery and proprietor Clayton Berg, “a crotchety old propagator who just knew everything.”

“We talked and learned,” he adds, with “the sort of questions that end up giving you direction. Plants in these areas and southwest Alberta weren’t explored, except for a phase 80 years ago. No one had use of them.”

They moved north again, putting down their own roots and artfully choosing a bare hayfield. Their nursery is west of Calgary on Springbank Road, on a low, frost-prone windy site subject to the brunt of the Chinook winds, and with clay loam soil high in organic matter.

“We started out collecting seeds from marking out areas on maps, driving down endless sideroads,” says Pam. “Trees first (for cash flow) and then the shrubs. We aimed at making our imprint as small as possible, learning about Alberta’s unique grasses.” They now sell Rocky Mountain and Rough fescues pre-mixed.

As with any gardening—shelterbelts included—they feel the hardest part is to begin. So many people are reluctant and lack confidence. However, with today’s tighter economy many people are finding this refreshing because

they’re doing the actual work themselves. Once you landscape, you’ll feel ownership. They give regular seminars and practical workshops, and invite people to bring along their digital cameras.

To help them teach and conduct their seminars, the Wrights recently bought the two barns between their house and the gravelled range road to the west.

“We want to encourage young people to set up similar nurseries, pass along our knowledge,” says Ken with a thoughtful squint sunward. With a grin he adds, “We’re looking for a few more challenges, really.” *C

A spectacular jumble of white spruce, larch, poplar, buffaloberry, dogwood, and saskatoons along one shelterbelt