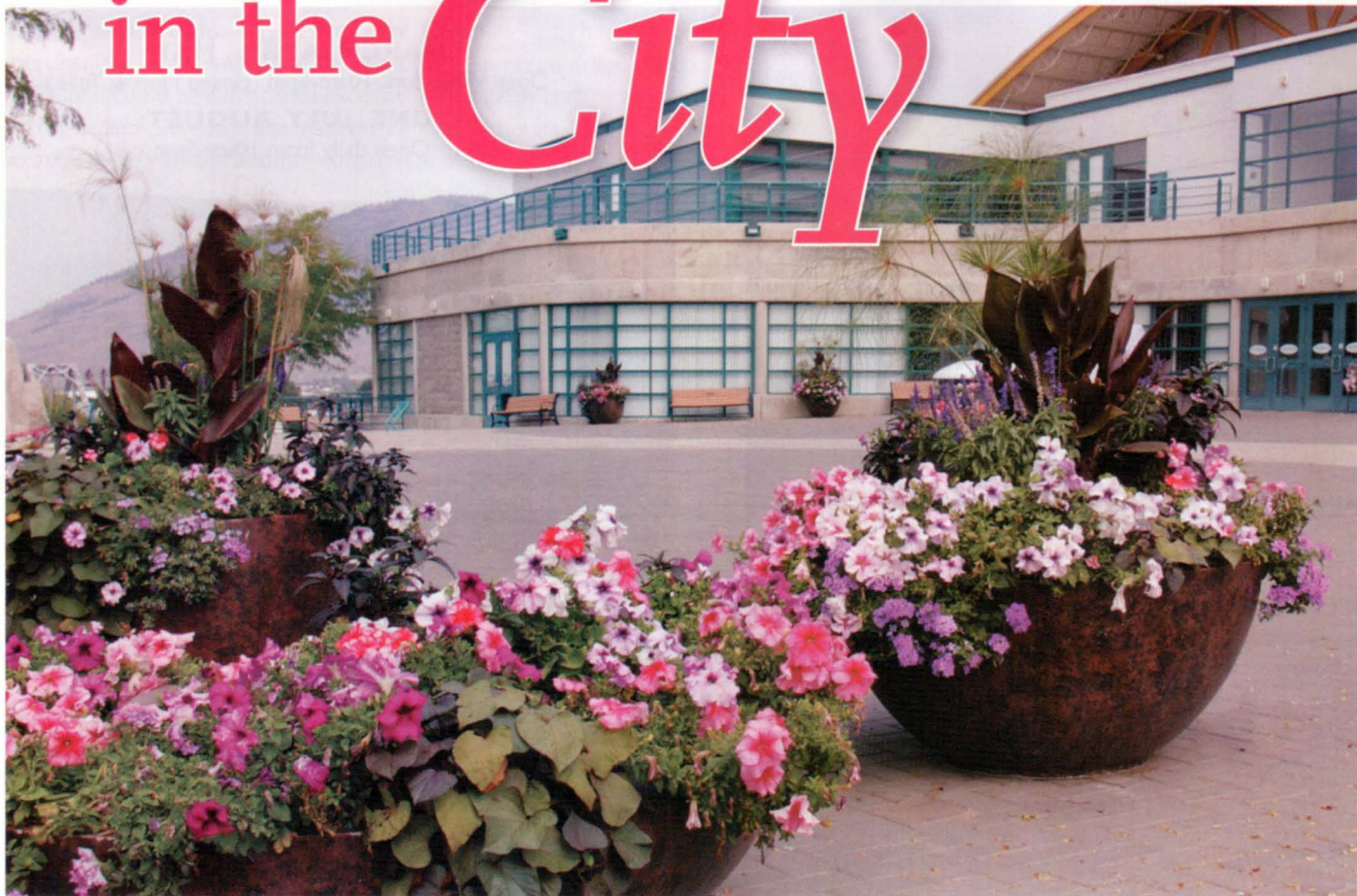


Hot Pots

in the City



Massive planters bring colour to Riverside Flag Plaza. Last fall's planters employed canna lilies and umbrella palms to add bulk and height, while purple potato vine provided contrast and set the stage for the show-stoppers: the brilliant and prolific blooms of petunias and geraniums.

By Shannon Linden

When I moved to Kamloops a few summers ago, I drove up and down Columbia Street a lot. With central access to everything from malls to the downtown core, it's an easy route for newcomers. But what struck me most was how easy it was on the eyes.

With its panoramic view of the city spread out along the river below, down the descent of a hill worthy of San Francisco, Columbia is a character street, alive with people — and plants.

Beginning with the Marigold Mile — that lovely boulevard planter that divides coming and going

lanes of traffic — to the lush lawns of Royal Inland Hospital, where leafy trees shade folks sipping their Starbucks, Columbia combines busy with beauty.

Take the length of retaining wall below St. Ann's Academy — the stretch of what might have been boring, grey concrete becomes a sea of green leaves in summer as Virginia Creeper ripples down and reaches across the wall, tumbling freely toward the spectacular planters below.

Modern, square-shaped pots surfaced in exposed aggregate, a row of the beauties stand proud at the base of the wall. Anchored by huge banana plants,

the dramatic displays burst with colour, spilling over with flowers and vines.

Carry on downtown to Riverside Park, stroll Station Plaza or Pioneer Park, or cross the bridge to the North Shore and drive along Tranquille Road and visit McArthur Park and that Wow factor follows — because all of these areas have been decorated by designers who specialize in beauty of the natural kind.

Outdoor artists — the gardeners who create the hanging baskets, massive pots and boulevard gardens that adorn the city from spring to fall — plan their work year round.

Enter Diane Hale. As manager of the Kamloops City Greenhouse and a gardener two (gardeners are level one if they have a certificate in horticulture; level two if they have twice the training or more extensive experience), she has her work dug out for her.

While most of us roll up our gardening sleeves around April, she's up to her elbows in dirt 12 months of the year.

That's because the bounty of plants and flowers that have helped earn Kamloops national and international awards for the Communities in Bloom contest, are born of seeds planted in the winter and nursed to life in the spring in the city's greenhouse. The process — from planting seeds, to designing and implementing displays, through the seasonal weeding and maintenance of those pots, planters, baskets and boulevards, followed by the digging up of, composting of annuals, and returning of tropical plants to the greenhouse — takes Hale through the four seasons.

It is a sub-zero day when I meet her at the greenhouse at the end of McGill Road, but inside the earthy perfume of rich dirt combines with the warm, wet air to transport me to the tropics. The crunch of gravel under foot and the soothing sight of greenery punched with bursts of colour makes me feel like I am strolling through a rain forest, rather than seeking shelter from the remains of winter outside.

"Come over here!" she ushers me through the door. "Look at this! We've had a visitor."

She waves her hand over a group of little pots, their surfaces sprouting with fresh leaves.

"A weasel got in and ate the pansies." She shakes her head in good-humoured exasperation before adding, "But he does eat the mice, which are a real problem."



Photo: Keith Anderson

City of Kamloops greenhouse manager Diane Hale with vibrant lime green sweet potato vine, a versatile plant that will figure prominently in city planters.

Visiting wildlife, including deer that like to munch on plants in outdoor holding boxes, pose problems at the greenhouse, but this year's unseasonably cold start to spring is more of a concern. Extra heaters have been brought in to combat the chill, but the atmosphere inside is warm.

The place is blooming with creativity as the other three gardener twos who work with Hale exchange ideas and chat comfortably, their hands caked in dirt, smiles of contentment resting on their faces. For Dawn House, Kirsten Aylen, and Mike DeCicco, digging in the dirt is the best job on earth.

"It's so gratifying to see the work you've done and to watch so many people take such enjoyment in it," House says.

Aylen nods in agreement.

"Stepping back and seeing what you've created is rewarding," she says.

For DeCicco, working outdoors is one of the best benefits, but for all of them, bringing their creations to life, and enhancing the look and feel of the city they live in, is serious business.

Each designer takes responsibility for one of four

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