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Leucanthemum × *superbum*, *Delphinium*, *Coreopsis* and *Campanula* species are some of the long-blooming perennials that were chosen for this garden.

Only high-quality compost, alfalfa fertilizer and humus soil with proper soil preparation were used.



Inspiration

Hardy, carefully selected perennials enable a couple in Breckenridge, CO, to enjoy an English cottage garden despite a 9,500-foot elevation.

by DAN GRONNING

Each summer when the steamy heat began seeping into Washington, DC, Susan Propper and Donald Dankner couldn't wait to escape to their cool, quiet vacation home in the mountain village of Breckenridge, CO. Its east-facing back windows featured a postcard-worthy view of peaceful mountains, which was reason alone to make the getaway.

However, the front-facing kitchen window offered only a drab view of the street and neighbor's home just beyond. It was so uninspiring that it caused Propper to dread doing the dishes. One day, she realized what was missing from that view: a garden.

Specifically, Propper envisioned a charming perennial garden resembling those found outside typical English cottages. Of course, planning such a garden at an elevation of 9,500 feet presented obvious challenges. The existing soil's organic matter was sparse, the air was dry, and the winters were harsh.

None of this deterred Propper. After consulting with neighbors and friends to find a good gardening company, she and Dankner heard great things about Raindrops on Roses LLC. Launched in 2003 by Juliana Maes, the Silverthorne, CO-based company had a reputation for extreme



Nepeta, which was an existing perennial the Raindrops on Roses crew was able to save, fits in beautifully among *Sedum* 'Vera Jameson'.

No chemical fertilizers have ever touched this mountain garden.

at Elevation

gardening passion, a spirit of diligence and compassion among its crews, and fanatical attention to detail.

In August 2008, Propper met with Maes and described her vision for the property. The couple preferred a garden that was vivid and visually engaging, but completely natural in appearance. “When she said they wanted it to have the look and feel of a mountain-style English cottage garden, I had a pretty accurate idea of what they were looking for, and I knew exactly who to turn to for the design,” Maes says.

In addition, Propper required that her garden have an informal look with a wildflower feel and no “matchy matchy.” It should have lots of color with different heights and textures, including long-blooming perennials. Because the couple’s primary residence is in Washington, DC, Propper wanted to know that when visiting Breckenridge during the summer,

something would always be blooming in her garden.

Planning the garden. For this project, Maes chose to collaborate with landscape architect John D. Longhill, who is also based in Silverthorne. Prior to 2008, Raindrops on Roses had subcontracted all of its garden designs to local landscape designer Jennifer Mantle, but she started working full-time for a large, high-end landscape design/build firm. In spring 2008, Maes started looking for a new garden design subcontractor. Fate led Maes, a master gardener, to Longhill, who is a fellow master gardener and award-winning landscape architect. Maes valued his down-to-earth, easygoing approach and decided to have him design the Propper/Dankner garden. “John loves designing beautiful gardens as much as Raindrops on Roses enjoys installing them,” Maes says.

After the initial meeting with Propper, Maes met with Longhill, and together, they went over her notes. These included all of the homeowners’ requests, such as bright colors; long-blooming, informal perennials; and nothing too over-the-top or pretentious. “It’s a garden that makes you smile,” Maes says. “There is great value and beauty in that simple quality.”

Longhill drew up a design plan and then presented it to Maes. Together, they developed a selection of plants that performed well in Zone 3. The plants were chosen based on Propper’s criteria, as well as what had proved to do well at such a high elevation. No finicky plants were included — only tried-and-true, high-altitude perennials. Throughout the project, Maes remained the point of contact with Propper and Dankner, serving as the project’s “garden general manager.”

The final plant selection included Bak-

Snapshot

Company name: Raindrops on Roses LLC

Owner: Juliana Maes

Location: Silverthorne, CO

History: Raised in Pasadena, CA, in a family full of gardeners, Maes learned the value of a garden from her mother and grandparents. It wasn't until the year 2000 when she fell in love with a landscaper (now her husband) that her passion for gardening was rekindled.

In 2003, she launched Raindrops on Roses with nothing more than a 1995 bright red GMC Sierra named Clifford, a toolbox, a shovel and a dream. Her vision allowed her to transcend a potpourri of mistakes made during the first couple years. She attributes her success to the ability to learn from those mistakes. Today, Raindrops on Roses is a thriving company with a dozen full-time and part-time employees and an impeccable reputation.

Philosophy: "At Raindrops on Roses, we believe in the transforming power of a garden — the ability it has to bring you joy, give you pride and make you smile. It simply requires that it be taken care of and enjoyed, and in return, it gives you beauty and adds color to your life. Our goal at Raindrops on Roses is to make absolutely certain your garden is successful."

Web site: www.raindropsgardening.com



A challenge for the Raindrops on Roses crew was digging out the grass and weeds from compacted soil that had overtaken the areas where they needed to plant.

er's blue spruce (*Picea pungens* 'Bakeri'), 'Red Velvet' yarrow (*Achillea millefolium* 'Red Velvet'), peach-leaved bellflower (*Campanula persicifolia*), 'Olympica' bluebell bellflower (*Campanula rotundifolia* 'Olympica'), 'Sunburst' coreopsis (*Coreopsis grandiflora* 'Sunburst'), 'Pacific Giant Mix' larkspur (*Delphinium* × 'Pacific Giant Mix'), 'Caesar's Brother' Siberian iris (*Iris sibirica* 'Caesar's Brother'), 'Alaska' shasta daisy (*Leucanthemum* × *superbum* 'Alaska') and 'Vera Jameson' stonecrop (*Sedum* 'Vera Jameson').

While most of these plants were hardy in Zone 3, a few Zone 4 species were added because they had performed well for Maes in past projects. With the right soil preparation, it was possible to push the limit with certain Zone 4 plants. Those chosen for the Propper/Dankner garden were a good example.

"One of my favorite things that John added to the design were three small Bak-

er's blue spruce trees," Maes says. In fact, she believed these touches sealed the deal, giving the garden a good balance of mountain style combined with the soft impact of an English cottage garden.

Installing and maintaining the garden.

The actual project took five days to complete in late August 2008. In addition to Maes, the Raindrops on Roses installation crew included foreman Robin Macri, foreman Josey Smith and assistant foreman Meghan DeCoursey.

The installation was not without challenges. The crew had to dig out the grass and weeds that had overtaken the areas where they needed to plant. They also had to dig out the sad-looking, low-growing junipers. The soil was initially compacted, making it hard to work with. Fortunately, the Raindrops on Roses crew was able to save some of the existing plants, like catmint (*Nepeta*), lupine (*Lupinus*), *Iris* and

aspen (*Populus tremuloides*). "People hire Raindrops on Roses because they want to add a perennial garden," Maes says. "They are happy with their existing landscape, but they want to add color. We specialize in adding some pizzazz to what they already have."

Maes' team purchased the plants for the site from a reputable, high-quality greenhouse. They tilled the existing soil to a depth of 12 inches, after which they added a 3-inch layer of compost and mixed it into freshly tilled soil. They also added a handful of Alaska humisoil to the bottom of every planting hole. Finally, they spread a 2-inch-thick blanket of mulch and thoroughly watered-in the newly planted perennials.

As a member of the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado (ALCC), Maes felt it was important to follow best management practices (BMPs), which the organization promotes. In the case of the Propper/Dankner garden, following the guidelines entailed amending the existing soil prior to planting, preparing the site for the arrival of materials and choosing plants that proved to do well at high, arid elevations.

Amending this garden allowed for improved pore space, translating into additional water storage, efficient water distribution and, therefore, less frequent waterings. Amending the soil also helped to protect water quality. Healthy, hearty soil translates into strong, sustainable plants. No chemical products are needed to care for this garden, so there is never a risk of polluting groundwater supplies.

Since the installation, whenever spring arrives, Raindrops on Roses topdresses the garden with a mix of Maes' favorite amendments — composted cotton burrs and humic acid. After that, they make routine maintenance visits every two weeks, which consist of weeding, deadheading and staking the heavy perennials. Because the soil was prepped properly, it has become a healthy garden, and there haven't been any insect or disease problems.

Ultimately, every idea Propper had envisioned was implemented in this garden. Upon arriving in Breckenridge one year after the garden's inception and seeing it in full bloom for the first time, she exclaimed, "Spectacular!"

Industry appreciation. Once the project was completed, Maes felt the Propper/Dankner garden would make an ideal submission for ALCC's annual Excellence in Landscape (EIL) Awards. The EIL Awards honor unique Colorado landscapes that are designed, constructed,

The benefits of healthy soil are priceless, as evidenced by the fullness of the garden only a year after installation.



irrigated, renovated and managed by members of the ALCC.

Categories range from landscape construction and Xeriscape to renovation, water features, special areas, design/build, landscape maintenance, interior landscape and use of color. Raindrops on Roses entered the Propper/Dankner garden in the "Use of Perennials" category. The judging panel consists of experts that

represent a cross-section of Colorado's green industry. Winning entries are selected on the basis of the design impact, attention to detail, degree of difficulty, overall appearance, work quality, incorporation of the industry's BMPs and quality of plant materials.

One day in January 2010, several months following the submission of her awards entry, Maes stopped by her post

office box on her way home. She discovered a letter from the ALCC, which began, "Dear Mrs. Maes: We are pleased to inform you that your project has been selected for our 2010 Excellence in Landscape Awards."

"When I opened the letter and began reading it, my fingers started trembling," Maes says. "I was so caught up in the moment, I actually lost my way home from the post office."

The award was significant for the young company because it put them shoulder to shoulder with more established, better-known entities that made up the 37 other winners. Maes is quick to acknowledge that the project's success would not have been possible without her crew. "Robin, Josey, Meghan and the rest of my crew are amazing," Maes says. "My company would not be where it is today without them."

As for Propper and Dankner, the couple couldn't be happier with the results. Propper even revealed to Maes that Dankner, who is a businessman, is so proud of their garden he has a picture of it as a screen saver on his computer.

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Achillea millefolium 'Red Velvet', a drought-tolerant and easy-to-grow perennial, is an excellent choice for a high-altitude garden.

