

# HELLSTRIP GARDENS

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY MELANIE REKOLA



Whether you call it a hellstrip, boulevard or street lawn, the space we're speaking of is the struggling ribbon of grass between the road and sidewalk that many city dwellers have in front of their properties.

That grass is, in fact, one of the highest maintenance plants you have. It constantly needs watering, feeding and cutting, not to mention the salt damage that often occurs in these spaces during winter. Why not make a lush, low care and biodiverse garden here instead?

Technically speaking, the boulevard is owned by the city, but residents are still expected to maintain them. Many municipalities have restrictions as to what can be done to these spaces (usually height, material and setback restrictions) so before you begin planning, do your due diligence and check with your township for its requirements.

You've likely guessed by the name that hellstrips are tough spaces for plants. They're subjected to extreme heat from being surrounded by paving and concrete. It's also a place where trash collects and where dogs urinate. They have the potential to be trod upon by people exiting parked cars who pay little attention to what they're stepping on. Yet, with the proper tough, drought and salt-tolerant selections, these areas can flourish with life!

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# gardening

Melanie's easy care, salt and drought-tolerant plant picks:



Hoary vervain

## THE PERENNIALS

### Hoary vervain / *Verbena stricta*

Spikes of lavender/blue blossoms last for about two months in summer. It's a very beautiful native plant that attracts many bees and butterflies and the seeds feed the birds in winter too.

### Prairie smoke / *Geum triflorum*

A very, very tough, drought tolerant small native plant for the front of the border. It has interesting seed pods that look like smoke later in the season.

### Purple coneflower / *Echinacea purpurea*

Everyone's favourite summer flower. Enjoy big pink/purple flowers with a spiky orange centre that are long blooming and it's native too. Needs care and watering its first year but is drought tolerant once established.

### Grey-headed coneflower / *Ratibida pinnata*

Similar to purple coneflower, but with masses of clear yellow, artfully drooping petals instead. A native North American variety that sports delicate lacy foliage.

### Prairie dropseed grass / *Sporobolus heterolepis*

This hardy but delicate native grass forms dense, arching, fountain-like foliage.

### Daylily / *Hemerocallis*

A super strong plant with strappy foliage that blooms in an array of colours even in the driest conditions. Choose a variety that repeats to extend the flowering season.

### Liatris / *Liatris spicata*

Fuzzy, tall spikes of lavender purple blooms in summer. Another North American native variety that is great as a cut flower and brings butterflies, too.

### False Blue Indigo / *Baptisia australis*

Interesting foliage and pea-like indigo blooms with unique seed pods that follow. A large native perennial not seen enough.

### Common Yarrow / *Achillea millefolium*

Unique architectural, flat-topped flowers stand tall above short feathery foliage. This flower shape makes perfect landing pads for butterflies and other pollinators. Their long-lasting flowers usually begin blooming in late summer.

### Sedum / *Sedum*

So many varieties to choose from, but most are extremely drought tolerant with fleshy leaves. I like the low growing types that create mounds all along the front of the border and keep mulch and soil from spilling out onto the road and sidewalk.



Purple coneflower



Grey-headed coneflower



Allium

Daffodils

Snowdrops

Crocus

## SPRING BULBS

Start your hellstrip garden's beauty off right with an array of early bloomers! Another nice thing about spring bulbs is they bring lots of fresh green foliage early on too. Try a mix of various allium, daffodils, snowdrops and crocus. All will naturalize over time, giving you more flowers every year.



Cosmos

## ANNUALS

If you want maximum blooms, try these easy-to-grow annuals. Just spread these seeds after the last frost date for lots of summer flowers: Cosmos, Zinnia, Love in a mist and Poppies. You can save the seeds in fall for next year's planting too and sometimes they even reseed themselves.

Hellstrip gardens can be taken a step further and be made into a runoff filtering rain garden. This is easily achieved by digging out, lowering and grading the soil level of the garden so that it collects runoff water. Some municipalities even give a subsidy for rain garden installation. An added benefit of doing this is that you can choose plants that have a higher moisture requirement beyond the above list, which really opens plant possibilities for maximum garden creativity.

Any way you plant it, a garden is much more appealing than tired old turf. It creates curb appeal while providing habitat and food for pollinators at the same time. Give something nice for the neighbours to enjoy as they walk by – just imagine the possibilities! **OH**