



# THE REAL ESTATE REPORT

September 2007

## Gardening for Dinner and Delight Part 1

Short of a medieval castle, gardens are a universal attribute of human habitation, likely first found as far back as the beginnings of agriculture over 10,000 years ago, in the very place where today it is neigh on impossible to garden - Baghdad. Those first gardens consisted of edible wild plants replanted near home. Fencing must have been the second invention of the agricultural revolution.) Thus the kitchen garden was born. As the appreciation of beauty predates agriculture (remember cave art and burial decorations), we can imagine that flowering plants were also transplanted to homes, bringing delight to dinner. Kitchen and ornamental gardens have been with us ever since, migrating from the Middle East into Europe and then to the American colonies where early descriptions recount the almost universal pattern of small, fenced-off kitchen gardens with larger orchards beyond and cultivated fields in the distance. The content of ornamental gardens can be teased out of contemporaneous documents which mention newly discovered native flowering plants and shrubs, as well as European imports and, in later centuries, exotics from distant lands.

### The parterre garden

The legacy of our gardening past is very much with us today as new property owners, once their home is built or renovated, take special pleasure in laying out natural order and beauty around the home. For that we turn to sources of plants and planting advice: nurseries and Boxwood Garden

This boxwood and yew hedge garden is forty years old; it could easily have been four hundred. First developed in France, parterre ("on the ground") gardens are formally symmetrical arrangements of straight and curved beds of clipped hedging, usually boxwood and sometimes with yews, and often filled with colorful beds of flowers. Some feature clipped topiary shapes in imitations of animals or abstractions. Placed close to houses, they formed "rooms" best viewed from upper windows. An English eighteenth century reaction to such regularity swept almost all away in favor of picturesque naturalistic landscapes. Revived a century later and again today, parterre gardens are elegant yet less time consuming to maintain than weed-prone cottage gardens. Kinderhook nurserymen (and women), garden centers, horticulturalists,



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garden designers, and, of course, the legion of home gardeners who so freely share their experiences and surplus stock with new friends. Let me begin with the experiences my wife De-Guerre and I have had at our old Dutch farmhouse in Kinderhook since buying it forty years ago.

A long elm-lined approach created an expectation of a grand colonial home with an equally grand view of the Kinderhook Creek valley. Alas it proved to be a neglected, even decrepit, clapboard house with irregular additions and an even more irregular crop of sumac all over its back yard and hill. As the site was potentially lovely, our contractor suggested demolishing the house and building anew as the site was lovely. Instead we turned the bulldozer around to clear for a garden. This clearing process continues even today as we add more gardens. During the Depression the Beekman sisters operated the property as a

bed-and-breakfast. It was called Meadow Lawn, an honest premonition of the state of affairs - despite the elms. We did manage to save the sisters' Victorian garden which provided inspiration for what would come next.

With the advice of talented gardener (and interior designer) Herb Cutler of Kingston, we laid out something that had not been seen in this region in two centuries - a very formal parterre of boxwood and flowers on two levels, inspired by a birdseye view of New Amsterdam houses and gardens dating from 1660. We learned some lessons along the way. Boxwood takes five years to look anything like a proper hedge. English box is not hardy in this climate and in winter we must cover it with burlap. Korean box is hardy. Fortunately many hybrids have been developed, largely solving the problem of winter kill. Once we completed the initial planting of hundreds of plants, we also learned that boxwood gardens are easier to care for than informal flower

gardens, which need constant weeding and thinning. Boxwood grows slowly, a frustration at first but a blessing long term. Where we planted in poor soil the hedge remains trim and small; where we planted in rich soil we have had to replace hundreds of plants every ten years or so as they have grown too big, despite being clipped twice each summer. But what a delight this kind of garden is, a form of natural green sculpture with contrasting inner beds of colorful flowers.

Next came another throwback to the colonial era, a small apple orchard, although this time in dwarf forms to fit the avail-

able space. However, we apparently buried the stock too low in the ground, thereby causing them to revert to their larger forms. The required heavy pruning is gladiator duty in this garden. Through the orchard we erected an arched pergola which is now covered like a tunnel with wisteria - inspired by DeGuerre's childhood garden. It seems a cozy and mysterious shelter, especially when lit by a candle chandelier.

### The raised box garden

Our enthusiastic attempts at vegetable gardening have been frustrated by raccoons who mow corn the night before it is ripe, deer who have the same timing for strawberries, woodchucks who are indiscriminate, dogs who wallow in only the best soil, and our being too busy to pick whatever may be left when ripe. Fences are usually unsightly but may be the best solution. Invisible fences may be a better idea, but collaring critters is rodeo-land. As planting and weeding can be backbreaking we returned to the past for a solution - raised boxes for vegetables. We installed several dozen two years ago, varying in size from 4 x 4 feet to 4 x 11, complete with an automatic watering system. Maybe it is the geometric layout or high tech watering, but the



**Raised Box Garden**  
Even more ancient than parterre gardens, raised box herb and vegetable gardens are at least medieval in origin. Compared to ground level kitchen gardens, they create a pleasing order through geometry and are easier to maintain – bending down a foot less is a real advantage. They are catching on as a way to combine aesthetic with practicality, both for food and flowers. Kinderhook

critters now respect more of our territory. The result, of course, is that too much of each vegetable ripens at the same time, causing a panic scouring of cookbooks for an adequate variety of recipes.

For the next garden DeGuerre turned to a real horticulturalist, Randy Hinz, who has relocated his practice from Long Island to Columbiaville in Columbia County. His nursery and landscape business is called The Sycamore, located on Route 9 between Hudson and Kinderhook. Trained to the field and experienced, Randy also brings the delight and enthusiasm of a born gardener to share with his like-minded clients. A conversation with him the other day brought out much wit and wisdom

about gardening and many ideas which ought to be shared with others. Here are some of his thoughts on what works in our region, both practically and philosophically.

### On garden styles and homes

Often you have to take your initial cue from the home-



**Cottage Garden**  
Tom Noonan's Gothic cottage in Hudson has the delightful advantage of a continuous front, side and rear yard which he and Randy Hinz took full advantage of to create such an appropriate cottage garden. The seasonal succession of growing plant forms and changing flower colors is a delight.

owner, like Tom Noonan in Hudson. Although he could have gone with a formal garden and still been appropriate to his Gothic house, he is more comfortable with a cottage garden, which is equally appropriate.

On the other hand, although Gini Casasco and Sue Lucarelli, also in Hudson, have taken a very formal approach, they could also have had a cottage garden because their house is a simple Victorian, and not in high style. Gini feels more comfortable with a formal garden; she likes the structure of it. Also with your house, it could have been a much looser garden all the way around the house and it would have looked totally appropriate. In other words, the structural changes you make in



**Formal City Garden**  
When Gini Casasco and Sue Lucarelli took over this somewhat neglected yard a while back, they started from scratch to invent a garden suited to their taste and comfort. Gini especially liked the clean order of a formal garden and with the assistance of Jeremiah Rusconi (who installed the "hardscape" including a raised box mini-garden and adjacent brick paths), Bob Hyland of Loomis Creek Nursery supplied many plants, and Randy Hinz applied his plant knowledge to fill in a variety of others.

a garden are far less pertinent than what you do inside the house. I don't get real tied up in keeping the garden strictly in

the period of the house.

With my own house in Hudson, when I renovated it, I tried to stay as close as possible to the period but that doesn't mean that all of my furnishing or color choices are appropriate to the period. I don't want to live in a museum. A house has to be comfortable for the owner and it is the same with the garden. As long it is well done, that is always the key. Even with cottage gardens there is still some control in the chaos, otherwise it would be just a mess.

### Working with clients

I have been very lucky up here with the people I have worked with. They all want what is nice and appropriate for the property and house. That was not always the case on Long Island. There it was totally different. For a period of time it was "the thing" to have a faux Japanese garden when of course Long Island has little to do with Japanese gardens, or what was perceived as a Japanese garden. But then there were also the customers who had true vision. I had a customer on Long Island who had a typical LI house. It was beautiful not because the house was beautiful but because of what she had done with it. She had rows of linden trees planted, pruned in French style. A moss garden and a rectangular pea gravel area which had only a beautiful urn in it. And her foundation planting was not a typical foundation planting. It was simple and beautiful. Up here most houses have so much architectural character that foundation plantings should be dead simple. There is a Victorian house on Broad Street in Kinderhook which is fantastic because it is just a mass of ferns; the house is beautiful. Most new houses, especially on LI, have cinder block foundations and you can't really feature the house in the way that you can an older house. A more complex foundation planting can add interest to newer houses and of course foundation planting makes sense in covering the cement block.

### Working with plantings and design

Half jokingly Tom Noonan and I are going to go around and put out signs which say "Stop the planting," sticking them in front of certain houses. Some people just go too far. You can't have every color and every texture, or every specimen evergreen, all jammed into the same garden with a very elaborate fence without having it look totally overdone and less attractive than it could otherwise be – and they spend a fortune on it. The value is not exclusively in the plants.

The value is equally in the design. You can put together the most expensive plants in the world and it can be very uncomfortable to look at. By contrast I have clients in Copake with a large property. The house is contemporary which suits them perfectly because the inside is very open. It sits up on a rise on 30 acres with a lot of mowed lawn. Deer are a major concern as they are surrounded by woodlands. They have many island gardens as they have acres of mowed lawn. The husband has a real penchant for rocks, so they have gorgeous unusual stones, really large boulders, that they have liberated from the grounds since digging the foundation for the new addition to the house. These rocks have become sculpture in the gardens and island beds, adding interest to the expanses of lawn. It is necessary on a property to have a foreground, a middle ground and then the long view. We used a lot of ornamental grasses in the island beds which look beautiful with a contemporary house. They are very deer resistant and they soften the rocks which they are jux-

tailed to. When you look at a very large rock you can almost feel the weight of it, but the ornamental grasses have movement and are soft and light in appearance which makes a nice contrast or marriage to the rock. By adding deer resistant perennials, we gave more color to the grass gardens. Now you can wander all over the property and you keep coming on these island plantings with interesting arrangements of stone and plants. Even though my clients have huge expanses of lawn, out to a thousand yards, they have left natural elements on the land; they did not strip the property. These islands have simply added interest to the natural landscape. I could go on, as we have added other kinds of gardens on this property, but you have to be in the gardens to really enjoy them.



**Features in a landscape**  
Island gardens with boulders liberated from the ground become natural sculpture set in beds of grasses and deer-resistant plants.

Our region is gifted with variable topography, a balance of open fields and mature woods, and ever changing seasonal colors and cover. For those who love great landscapes, the opportunity is here.

I am just beginning to work with a couple in Ghent with another large property, an ancient farm with a stone house and barns. They have a pool on a low rise and, instead of surrounding it with fencing, they cut the hill around and installed a stone wall, out of sight, leaving an expanse of grass large enough to re-erect an old barn to use as an entertainment kitchen. There is space for an herb garden which can be expanded to a more traditional kitchen garden with herbs, vegetables and cutting flowers. The property is missing some depth as it is really just mowed meadow until the distant tree line. It is nice to have a foreground, a middle ground and then the long view. We are discussing the addition, in the meadow behind the pool, of a few small copses of trees, to create a middle ground, something in the meadow for the eye to rest on and be entertained. Maybe crab apples to the right and higher up on the other side, a copse of beeches or birches to create depth. The foreground is not an issue as we have placed some large pots on the stone wall top. Out in the distance it is beautiful with a lovely tree line. The place has a natural beauty which is so common up here, one of the reasons why I came here.

To be continued next month: Gardening as a work in progress, Gardens as art, The Hudson Valley landscape, Plants in our climate, Critters in the garden