



DESIGNING WITH NATURE;

In an evolving Long Island home, a brimming garden works its way inside

By Irene Virag

When we bought our house nine years ago, I told my husband that we'd have to do two things the minute we moved in. "We'll have to get rid of those overgrown foundation plants," I said as we drove home from the closing. "And, of course, we'll have to do something about the kitchen." Well, it took us almost three years to move the massive rhododendrons and azaleas that blocked our views of the green lawn in the front yard and the freshwater pond that ripples along the edge of our backyard.

And I learned what every first-time homeowner and novice gardener comes to know -- once you start a project, there's no stopping, because no matter what your budget and best intentions, one thing inevitably leads to another.

Getting rid of the foundation plants meant putting in a dry well to deal with drainage problems and building a low stone wall. We redesigned the stairs leading from the den to the patio so we could accommodate more potted plants in the summer. We re-landscaped the front border with slow-growing dwarf conifers. Before long, a shade garden took root along the stone wall and a koi pond took shape nearby. We added thousands of daffodils and tulips and crocuses and hyacinths. And we planted a garden in the middle of the front yard -- a flower-vegetable garden where orange and yellow nasturtiums spill over the Belgian block borders of beds brimming with tomatoes and eggplants and lettuce and corn.

It wasn't until last year that we finally got around to the kitchen. And history repeated itself. "Doing the kitchen" became a euphemism for redoing the whole house.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer four years ago, my garden became a metaphor for rebirth and survival. In my head and my heart, the rooms of my home extend outside the walls of my house. My garden and

the pond behind our house are as much a part of where I live as my kitchen and bedroom and bathrooms. What I really wanted was to merge the inside and the outside.

It seemed overwhelming. I needed professional help. Luckily, I found Lynn Gerhard of Gerhard Designs in Islip. She understood my inner doubts and desires - and my budget, too. I like her philosophy. "The goal isn't to turn your house into a designer showcase," Lynn said. "Who wants to live in an overdone fantasy? The design and decor of your house should enhance your life." I knew what she meant. It's like a landscape in a flower show -- it's not a real garden.

And so we set about enhancing my life. We did it with paint and tile and fabric and windows and mirrors and rugs and furniture. With earth tones and floral patterns. With style and substance.

One of the things that drew us to the house in the first place was the large freshwater pond that shimmers beyond the edge of our backyard. Swans float in the rippling water and ospreys fish and great blue herons pose. We replaced two average-size windows in the master bedroom with an eight-foot-long, sliding glass door, and the world outside became a stage. Floral, wall-to-wall carpeting brought the backyard garden inside, and a stone patio carried the living space outside. The white walls were painted lemongrass -- a golden mustard color that echoes the autumnal hues of the birch and nyssa trees along the pond.

Lynn came up with the idea of a mirrored wall to catch the sunlight on the water and bring the pond into the room. "The mirrored wall expands the feeling of space in what is actually a small room," she explained. "Even though we've filled the room with as much furniture as we could, the mirror pulls in bits of the outdoors."

We filled the room with an armoire with flower carvings, a skirted table, a green bureau, an iron bed with cranberry dust ruffle and ivory matelasse spread, and draperies just a shade darker than the walls. The draperies and a valance lined in an orange-cream-cranberry-green plaid set off the sliding glass door like a perfect frame enhances a painting.

The floral carpet connects the master bedroom with a guest room across the hall that was transformed into a dressing-room closet. The walls are painted a deep rosy pink. The greens, yellows and maroons in the carpet are repeated in the tiles of the master bath. A hand-painted pastoral mural and another mirrored wall above the beige marble-topped vanity make a small bathroom seem as big as outdoors.

In another back room, we went where we had never gone before. The room was furnished like a college kid's first apartment -- a futon couch, a wicker chest, a fold-up bookcase. It gave new meaning to the phrase spare room. It was a room with no purpose -- we only went in there when we needed a sweater from the cedar closet. Now it's one of our favorite rooms in the house. In some ways, it's Lynn's greatest triumph.

When she first came to our house, we mentioned moving our computer into this room from an upstairs loft that was as hot as a sauna in the summer.

"But we don't want the room to look like an office," I said. Lynn smiled. The long narrow closet in the little spare room was transformed into a computer alcove with a built-in desk and wall-mounted shelves. And then she pulled out a wallpaper sample.

"I hate wallpaper," I said.

Even my husband, who tends to be more adventurous than I, was skeptical. "It's kind of dark, isn't it?"

Lynn placed the chocolate-brown paper with flowers in muted shades of pink and rose and gold and green on the dining room table. "Think about it," she said.

She's since told me she was nervous about her suggestion. "Here you were telling me you wanted to make the house light and airy, and I'm showing you dark brown wallpaper with muted colors. But once we decided on the floral carpet in the master bedroom, I liked the idea of using floral paper in a nearby room to keep the continuity. Sometimes it's nice to have pattern on the floor in one room and pattern on the walls in another."

The wallpaper's rich colors draw the scene outside the window right in. The greens of the paper pick up the lawn and the hellebores and epimedium growing nearby. Its pinks and creams echo the low-growing *Pieris japonica* and azaleas and rhododendrons that fill the borders along the foundation. We fell so in love with the wallpaper that we had cornice boxes for both windows fashioned from a matching fabric.

The sage-green rug in the study flows into the hallway and an adjacent guest room, like a garden path that runs from one vista to another. In the hallway a rectangular piece of carpet in a paler shade of green is inserted into the rug. Its raised-leaf pattern is the motif of the carpeting in the dining room, den and living room.

The dining room and den are actually one great room that looks out on the pond, and the subtle leaf pattern makes you feel like you're in the woods by the water's edge. We tore down dark paneling and decorative wooden beams, then artist Carol Reitz -- who did the bathroom mural -- painted the room with a soft beige faux-suede effect. Subtle green stenciling above a wall of windows in the den makes the ceiling appear higher.

"I love the plain windows here," Lynn said. "It's like you're on a boat." Now we relax on a new sectional upholstered in muted earth tones and enjoy natural wonders like the 40 swans we counted on the pond the other day.

The living room view is a landscape. When we built our garden on the front lawn, we laid it out so that the gated arbor was centered with the picture window. But the thing was, we almost never sat in our living room. And when we did, the couch faced the room instead of the view.

That combined with a burgeoning book collection scattered throughout the house made us decide to turn the living room into a library. It's almost done -- with floor-to-ceiling shelves painted in a rosemary-green shade, a cushioned window seat, a tiled fireplace and hearth and two upholstered swivel chairs so we can make the most of the view.

Throughout the rest of the house, we kept looking for ways to marry inside and outside. The foyer was reconfigured to accommodate an antique wrought-iron garden bench that was hidden in the potting room. A double front door with leaded glass provides a view of the koi pond.

And in a small powder room off the foyer, I indulged my flight of fancy. I'd always wanted a flowered pedestal sink. Now I have one. When Lynn told me there was a matching toilet-well, never mind that it cost three times what the sink did.

The tile throughout the potting room, kitchen, powder room and foyer echoes the soft earth colors that dominate both house and garden.

Since we didn't have enough space for a center island, Lynn designed the kitchen on angles. The electric cook-top, side-by-side refrigerator and double oven are positioned to section off a work area. A bank of windows looks out over the patio. A breakfast nook was created out of the green and black- and-brown-speckled granite countertop.

Lynn and her husband, Bruce, are a dynamic duo. He custom-built the whitewashed maple cabinets -- and the library, bathroom vanities and computer alcove, too. It's an amazing transformation from a kitchen that seemed positively gothic -- closed in by dark cabinets, a stucco ceiling and heavy wooden beams, a fake brick wall and patterned linoleum. Now the kitchen is light and airy, and the views of the pond are almost panoramic.

When it came time to order bulbs last fall, I thumbed through my catalogs with a swatch of the flowered wallpaper and a remnant of the floral carpet by my side.

I picked matching bulbs. My inside-outside adventure continues.

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