



## july inspiration...the garden of shame

Fourteen years ago, I inherited a garden. In the late summer of 2003, my husband and I bought a classic 1930's Georgian Revival in Northwestern CT. Along with the house also came a few gardens. We were lucky that the prior owners had a plan and some hardscape in stone and brick existed. At first glance, the gardens looked impressive and I figured that minimal work would be all that was needed to bring them back to their former glory. However, things tend to look different when you actually take a closer look, and in the same way that new owners renovate their interiors to make them more to their liking, we started tweaking here and there.

You all know how that goes and what came next. Over the past 14 years, our initial tweaks have turned into extensive work. It's interesting how one's perception can change. Once I sipped a few morning coffees staring at the garden behind the kitchen, all of its flaws rose up like the *Jolly Green Giant*. The plantings that I thought were so perfect, really were not. They have all been redone or at least in some way modified. We removed and/or expanded perennial beds, taken down trees, widen paths, built new brick walls, replaced the gazebo, planted boxwood hedgerows and shored up the existing hardscape.

It is easy to overreach with gardens. Unlike interiors that get a little tired looking, gardens need constant attention or they quickly become unmanageable. For a tired interior, you can add a few new throw pillows, splurge on some new lamp shades, and if you really want to be mad cap, a coat or two of a new paint color will do the trick. Plants on the other hand, need replacing, separating, feeding, deadheading and weeding or they quickly turn into a tangled mess and go to seed. That is a lot of maintenance. Once you have that garden, like having children, you are in for the long haul.

Before moving to Linden Hill Farm, our home was a converted General Store, circa 1847. The prior owners were retired and had an extensive vegetable garden, as well as several very large perennial beds. Our children were very young and I had no gardening help. The first thing I did was to remove the vegetable garden so the boys had a yard in which to play. I thought that would also free me up to focus on the two 50+ feet of perennial beds. I was clueless as to the work that was involved tending two such gardens. I spent every weekend weeding. One weekend I would get one section "weed free" only to return the following weekend to find that the weeds were back again. I became frustrated, exhausted, and a very grumpy mother. By the end of the summer I was a stressed out wreck and my family suffered for it. I learned my lesson, *Keep It Simple*.

When we moved to the new house, I didn't want to spend all of my time working in the garden so I was more realistic. I actually removed gardens around the pool area, happy enough with large planters of annuals. Of the remaining gardens, the *piece d' resistance* was a formal garden that surrounded a hexagonal room. It was a garden room that was created by overgrown yew hedges repeating the hexagonal shape. Inside the yew walls, four brick paths converged in the center of the garden and created a "roundabout". In each of the four quadrants, roses were planted.

The first time we saw the garden it was August and no roses were in bloom. I had no idea what species of roses were planted there, but judging from the sizes and shape of the plants, there seemed to be many different types. I couldn't believe my luck! I had inherited a large rose garden!

The following spring, roses of all colors, species and sizes appeared. Sounds good but it was very disappointing. There seemed to be no be no apparent thought or reason given to color compatibility, height placement, or climate zone. Adding insult to injury, the plants were swimming in a sea of mulch that was extremely unattractive. It was a hodgepodge seemingly with no thought in mind. Whomever laid out that garden, what were they thinking?

The rose bushes were filled with dead wood, diseased leaves, and infested with insects. July came and the Japanese beetles swarmed in with a vengeance, decimating everything in its sight. The garden was simply a mess. We soon started calling it *The Garden of Shame*.

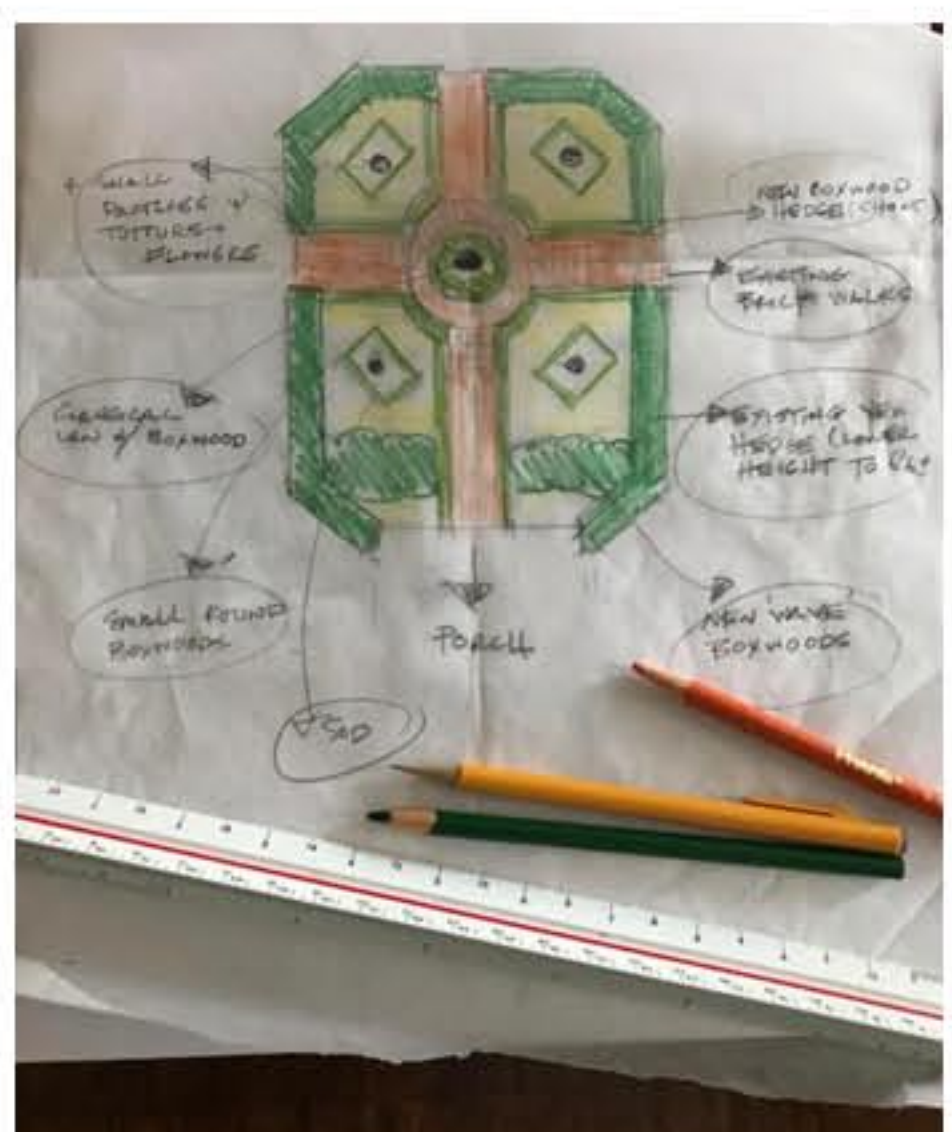
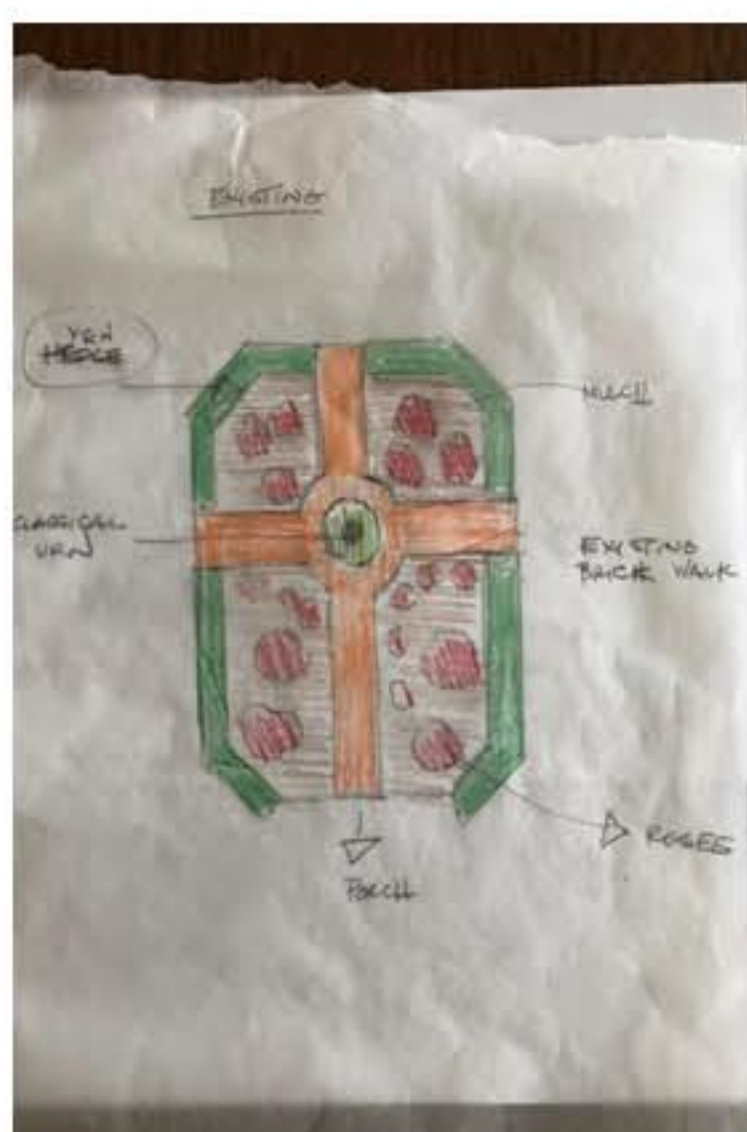
For five years, I stubbornly gave it my best try. I planted new roses to fill in areas that needed it and removed rose bushes that were diseased or dead. Then, in total frustration and defeat, I just gave up. I had not heeded professional advice that roses don't do well in Northwestern Connecticut, thinking that I could and would prove them wrong. The British gardener that clipped our boxwoods sniffed that "only Mrs. Kissinger was able to grow roses in this climate"... and who knows roses better than the Brits? Obviously, not me.

I reluctantly decided to cut my losses and start over. That fall, I personally ripped out every single rose from the garden and spent the winter sketching new ideas. My inspiration was Edith Wharton's *Sunken Italian Garden* at The Mount, her home in Lenox Massachusetts. I saw that we could create the same effect in a more miniature version. There would be boxwood parterres with plantings surrounded by grass sod. It would give the formality I wanted and be low maintenance as well - no more constant weeding.



*The Sunken Italian Garden. The Mount*

After the roses had been removed, I sketched out the garden. The math wasn't working. For some reason, I couldn't get the symmetry to work. I played around with it a few times and then I decided to actually measure the garden. Once I drew it to scale, I immediately saw the problem .... it was not symmetrical ... (*hello!*). In order to create symmetry, I needed somehow separate a section of the larger half of the garden so that it matched the dimensions of the other side. But how?



Our British gardener (the same guy who warned me about growing roses), came up with the idea of creating a small, low boxwood hedge clipped in a undulated wave to even out the four quadrants. It turned out to be, as the British would say, "*Brilliant*". It was the perfect solution and soon the garden was on its way.

I always wanted a "White or Moon Garden" so we planted white flowers to bloom from early spring with lupines, alba foxgloves, white bleeding hearts. In summer, white echinacea, white clematis and white alliums take over and when the summer wanes, Clematis "Sweet Autumn" climbs up the tutors.

The *Garden of Shame* quickly shed it's ugly duckling appearance. We tried for a while to call it the *Garden of Fame*, but to us it will always be known as the name we used for first 5 years. Some names just stick.

There is nothing like admiring your hard work when the results are better than you ever imagined. In the early morning, when the sun floods in from the East, the garden is bright and full of promise. In the late afternoon and early evening, when the setting sun creates shadows and the mourning doves are cooing, it is *magic*. I look at it and am thankful to all of the hands that took part. That, to me, is what design is all about. Collaboration, vision, determination and ending up with something that is beautiful and true.

*Here's to beauty, truth, and magic.*

*Debra*



*The Garden of Shame*

## President

Debra Blair Design  
[dblair@blairdesignnyc.com](mailto:dblair@blairdesignnyc.com)  
 917-717-5020