

A Gardener's Tale

Kentucky is famous for its horses, basketball and bourbon, but its gardens have never received much attention. My family has deep roots in the Bluegrass State—we go back more than 200 years on both sides—and I was born and raised here. Admittedly, I'm a little biased, but I believe that Kentucky is home to some of the most spectacular green spaces anywhere, and one reason I wanted to write this book was to showcase our amazing gardens and landscapes. With its abundant farmland and lush greenery, Kentucky has a certain similarity to England, and Kentuckians take gardening as seriously as the British do. And the gardens aren't simply ornamental; they are put to abundant use. That is certainly true in Lexington and Louisville, which are very international cities with extremely active social calendars. During the warm weather months, a lot of entertaining in both places takes the form of elegant garden parties, complete with sterling silver cutlery, pressed linen napkins, and guests dressed in their finest. People in Kentucky put enormous energy and thought into their gardens, and they love to share them with family, friends, and even passersby.

As a landscape designer, I also had a practical reason for wanting to do this book: I think gardeners anywhere can learn a lot from Kentuckians. While Kentucky may resemble the English countryside, the weather is very different. England has consistently moderate temperatures and ideal growing seasons. Kentucky, by contrast, has a little bit of everything. Spring brings a lot of rain, which is good; native dogwoods and redbuds light up the ground. Summer tends to have blistering temperatures and high humidity, and the plants grow like weeds. Winters, on the other hand, can be quite cold. Fall is probably the best time of year: Kentucky has an abundance of hardwoods, such as oak and maple, and the foliage then is gorgeous. For gardeners, these wildly fluctuating conditions are a real challenge, and creating a garden that can maintain year-round appeal requires a lot of shrewd planning. There is always something to learn from Mother Nature, and I think the lessons Kentuckians have absorbed can be useful to others, too.

But the biggest reason for this book is to demonstrate that gardening gives all of us the opportunity to create an inviting, personal outdoor space that can serve as a refuge from the everyday world. Some of the twenty-one gardens profiled are from grand Kentucky estates, like Gainesway Farm outside Lexington, where Antony Beck has created a mini-Versailles that is as ambitious in scale as it is individual in detail. Others have been built on tiny plots right in the middle of the city. For example, Madonna and Craig Turner have crafted a compact oasis in the heart of Lexington that perfectly suits their busy lifestyle. They wanted the convenience of being downtown, but also desired a private, low-maintenance, lush space where they could relax and entertain. The solution was to tear up the existing lawn and install a small free-form pool surrounded by a bluestone patio and a dense living border interspersed with their favorite flowers. There's not a blade of grass in the backyard now, but there are plenty of comfortable chairs for visitors.

Great gardens can happen anywhere. Those included here, several of which I worked on, were chosen because of their distinctness—they have unique features or designs, are in unusual locations, or simply stand out for their beauty. One garden has all three attributes. It belongs to Nancy Barron, who lives and works in a downtown Lexington warehouse and was one of the first people in Kentucky to hire me. Her highly unconventional front and back plots, surrounded by a parking lot and a busy street, reflect her love of bright colors, recycled materials, and contemporary art. Built on concrete slabs, between the two of them they feature a makeshift pond fashioned out of an old metal sign, walls painted a vibrant turquoise, welded stainless-steel giraffe “sculptures”, and easy-care plantings like phosphorescent green creeping Jenny groundcover and ‘Autumn Joy’ sedum, whose pink blooms turn copper as they mature, attracting butterflies. The overall effect is stunning and as free-spirited as Barron herself.

I've also included three public gardens in the book: Yew Dell, Headley-Whitney, and Ashland, which was the Lexington estate of the nineteenth-century Kentucky statesman Henry Clay and is now a National Historic Landmark. They are magnificent spaces that

demonstrate the timelessness of great design, with the added benefit that they can be enjoyed by everyone.

Through the essays, you'll meet some of the most passionate and intelligent gardeners I know. A few of them, such as Libby Jones and Linda Bruckheimer, are dedicated preservationists, while others just wanted to put a little tranquility into their otherwise hectic lives. Along the way, you'll come across clever ideas for showcasing gorgeous vistas or hiding views that maybe aren't so great, for using water features, and for creating serene green spaces that are terrific for socializing.

The wonderfully lyrical and impressionistic photographs taken by my friend and colleague Christopher Hirsheimer will not only show you why the gardens included here are special, but will also leave you feeling as though you've stepped right inside (you may even find yourself sipping a mint julep as you leaf through the pages). Above all, my hope is that in seeing these gardens and hearing the stories of the people who created them, you will find pleasure and also a little inspiration, too.