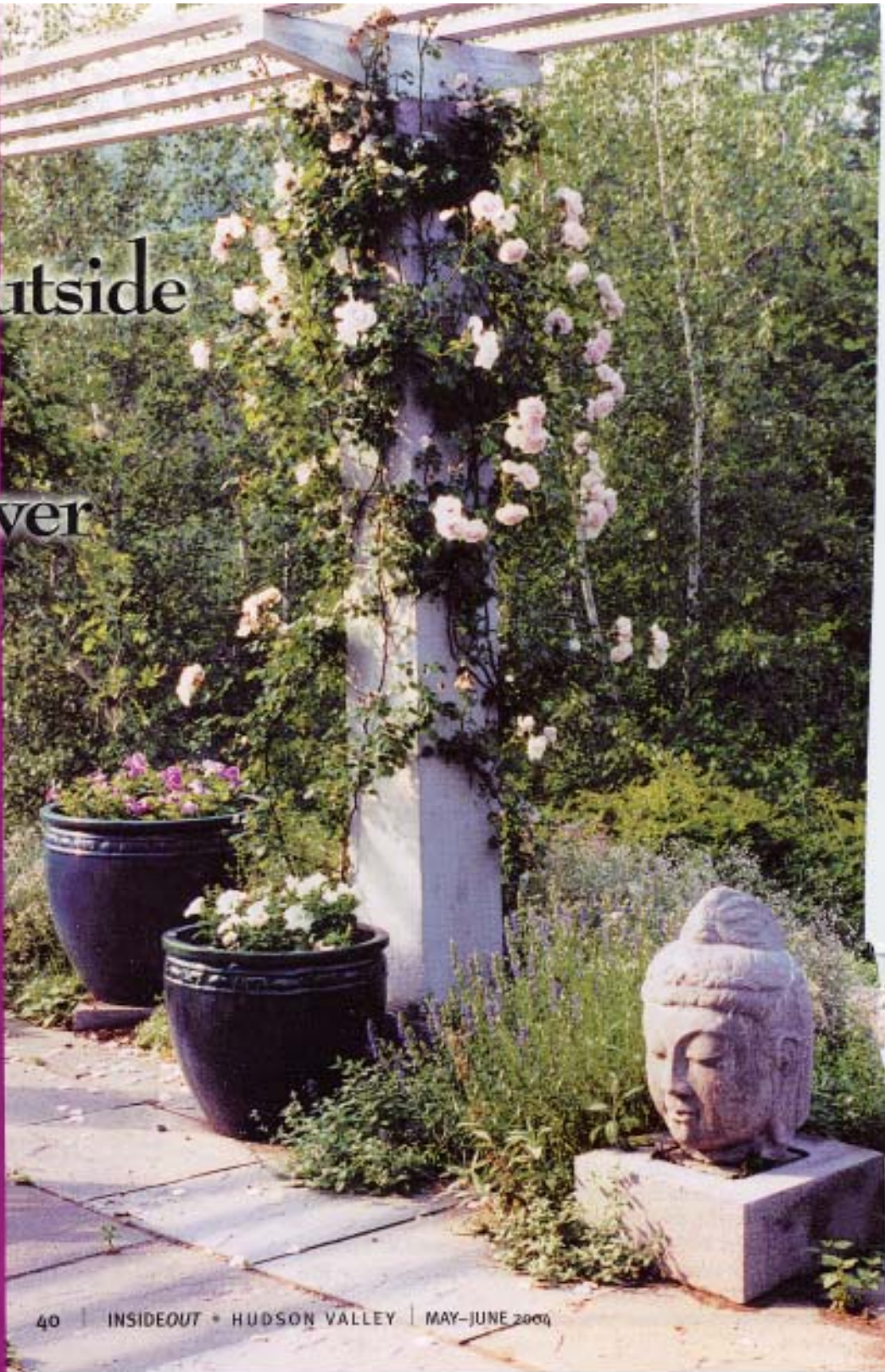


# Painting Outside the Lines in Full Flower

The success of a  
landscape designer's  
Olivebridge garden  
lies in blurring the  
lines of its formal plan

by Jorge S. Arango



The irony and intrigue that led to the demise of Louis XIV's finance minister, Nicolas Fouquet, are not lost on landscape designer James Dinsmore. What set Fouquet's downward spiral into motion, he explains, was a party he threw to unveil his luxurious new estate outside Paris, Vaux-le-Vicomte. Guests were treated to a lavish banquet, a specially commissioned play by Molière and much carousing in the palace's exquisite formal gardens.

Unfortunately for Fouquet, it also inspired envy in the Sun King, who realized that the minister's new digs were more ostentatious than his own. Eventually, says Dinsmore with obvious amusement, "Louis had Fouquet jailed for plundering the treasury, then he hired Charles Le Brun to create the palace and gardens of Versailles."

As Gertrude Stein once said about Isadora Duncan and her long scarves, affectations can be dangerous.

But 10 years after his visit to Vaux-le-Vicomte, Dinsmore continues to derive inspiration from the palace's grounds (as well as those of Monet's Giverny home and famous English gardens like Sissinghurst and Hidcote). It was the first place, says the 52-year-old horticulturalist, where he understood the structure of French gardens, which were basically a series of "rooms" laid out in a carefully planned geometric pattern. He also seems to have extrapolated a lesson from Fouquet's bad fortune: It is both wise and beautiful to blur the lines of that pattern so as to make the style's potential ostentation less obvious. "I like good structure in a garden—enclosed spaces, geometric shapes," admits Dinsmore. "But I try to soften the lines of the structure with the plantings."

And there you have the basic design philosophy behind Dinsmore's eponymous landscaping business, which is based in Olivebridge,



Dinsmore calls this parterre of portulaca "my one nod to Victorian carpet bedding." The latticework pyramids are planted with morning glories and, beyond, a latticework "temple" (built by Dinsmore) opens onto yet another room of the garden.

Ulster County. Dinsmore used to live in Warwick, but he had so filled that property with plantings, he says, "that if someone gave me a petunia I'd have to think real hard about how to shoehorn it in. I wanted a larger property that I could mold to my own taste and work the rest of my life."

So about 14 years ago, Dinsmore sold the Warwick home and went looking for the perfect plot of land. He's convinced a guardian angel led him to the property in Olivebridge. "The land had many features," he says, "open flat areas, steep areas, woods, a pond, a stream." It was a perfectly modulated canvas just waiting for his brush, and the first form he outlined on it was the house he shares with his partner of 23 years, Bill Benson. He built the structure himself on the highest point, which commands sweeping views of the Catskills. "I wanted the house to look like an element of the garden," he says, so its design (it looks like a large, very nice gardening shed) and materials (all environmentally sensitive) blended perfectly into the garden plan he had in mind.

His next step was to buy trees and shrubs in bulk—they

would form the walls of the various rooms he envisioned—and invite friends up for planting weekends. To reduce future maintenance, he was careful to choose hedge material that would grow to the size and shape he wanted to end up with. Then he fenced in about six acres. "I knew that if I was going to have the kind of garden I wanted, I needed to keep out the deer," he says. Eventually, he filled it all in with perennials.

Using allees, hedges, trellises and arches, he divided the garden into several smaller intimate spaces, each a different shape and color scheme. Among these is a cross-shaped hot garden (flame colors), a diamond-shaped blue-and-gold garden and a circular pink-and-purple garden. But the plantings tend to be bushy or trailing so that they spill over the lines of the pattern just slightly, softening what could

◀ Pink New Dawn roses climb a pergola at the back of the house, which is adjacent to a kitchen herb garden.



Dinsmore's cross-shaped "flat garden" has plantings of red monarda (bee balm), evening primrose, anemones, golden Marguerite, lychnis and red day lilies around a yellow wire obelisk.

have been a rigid, stuffy formality. He uses flora like a sculptor uses shapes, mixing columnar, standard and weeping plants for dramatic effect. "I don't have the budget of Versailles," he jokes. "I can't put in a lot of pools and cascading fountains, so I use plants that create those effects." For example, a weeping mulberry stands in for a fountain, its branches "cascading" into a pool of blue nepeta (cat mint).

Dinsmore plants what he likes, which includes some indigenous varieties (viburnum, catalpa trees, maples, winterberry holly), but also a lot of exotics (gingko, red-and yellow-twigged dogwood, narcissus). This is controversial in some gardening circles, where the prevailing notion is that you should stick with what's native and not introduce anything that will upset the ecosystem. "I love flowers, and in summer the garden is ablaze with blossoms. There are bees, hummingbirds, butterflies—many more than you'd find in nature," admits Dinsmore. "But as long as I don't plant something that becomes invasive beyond my property, I think it's okay."

It is certainly not an issue for passersby, who often stop in amazement when they come upon the profusion of colors or smell the fragrant Russian olive bushes that ring the property. Nor is it an issue with Dinsmore's clients, who come mostly from the surrounding areas and New York.

Of course, if Louis XIV were still around, he might have a problem. For more information, call Dinsmore Landscaping at 845-657-7180. ▼

## The Right Stuff

You can pick up daffodils and lilacs just about anywhere, but James Dinsmore suggests these sources for varieties that are out of the ordinary, as well as for interesting garden ornaments and supplies.

### ULSTER COUNTY

**Augustine Landscaping & Nursery, Kingston:** Especially good for those who want "instant maturity" since they carry many large specimens of trees and shrubs. 845-338-4936

**Catskill Native Nursery, Kerhonkson:** A small purveyor specializing in indigenous perennials, shrubs and fruit trees. 845-626-2758

**Story's Nursery Inc., Freehold:** A huge selection of plants at all stages of growth, plus some unusual trees. 518-634-7754

**Terrace Farm Nursery & Greenhouse, Phoenicia:** An excellent selection of shrubs, perennials and trees. And, says Dinsmore, "They grow most of their own stock, so you know whatever they sell will be hardy."

### DUTCHESS COUNTY

**Northern Dutchess Botanical Gardens, Rhinebeck:** They specialize in perennials ("There are literally hundreds of varieties"), especially old-fashioned, hard-to-find flowering plants. 845-876-2953

**Phantom Gardener, Rhinebeck:** Unusual specimens like paw-paw trees as well as urns, metal arches, statuary and other garden ornaments. 845-876-8606

### COLUMBIA COUNTY

**Wolf's Nursery, Columbiaville:** An enormous operation specializing in native and exotic varieties of trees grown on the premises (sizes vary, but if you're a size queen, be sure to bring a flatbed). 518-828-5416

The first "room" one enters is the circle-shaped pink-red-white garden, which is planted with, among others, hydrangea Annabelle, red roses and pink potentilla. The house, which Dinsmore built himself, is visible in the background.

