



COLORFUL MIX: Chartreuse foliage, vibrant annuals, and sunny Rudbeckia mingle at the foot of Chrissie D'Esopo's backyard hill garden. Photo by Chrissie D'Esopo.

Painting With Flowers

Five area artists share the gardens they've transformed into living masterpieces

“I am good at only two things,” Claude Monet once said, “and those are: gardening and painting.” Indeed, the 20th-century French painter, considered by many to be the father of impressionism, derived much inspiration from his beloved gardens at Giverny. Though paintings of his gardens, lily-pond and its Japanese bridge grace the walls of museums around the world, Monet claimed that the garden itself was his “most beautiful masterpiece.”

For many area artists, gardens provide not only subject matter for their art, but also another outlet for their creativity: They regard unplanted soil as a blank canvas, flowers and foliage as tools for exploring color, and the artful placement of plants as a means of creating composition. Says decorative artist Chrissie D'Esopo, whose spectacular Avon garden turns so many heads that fender-benders are a regular occurrence on the street in front of her flower-bedecked home: “Gardening is my art outside on a 3-acre panel. I'm basically painting with flowers.”



AVON CALLING: Unusual conifers add year-round interest to D'Esopo's colorful garden. Photo by Chrissie D'Esopo.

Here, *Seasons* visits local artists to explore how they express their individual aesthetics through art and gardening.

Chrissie D'Esopo, Avon

"I do my art in my yard and in my house," says Chrissie D'Esopo, who has run a decorative painting business ~ and has wowed Avon neighbors with her color-packed gardens ~ for the past 30 years. While her interior art ~ exemplified by Rococo stenciling along the ceiling in her stairwell, a French frottage finish on the walls of her master bedroom, and faux Venetian plaster in a guestroom ~ tends toward deeper earth tones, her horticultural art bursts forth in a riot of color.

Bright red coleus spills out of window boxes, giant pots of pink petunias perched atop pedestals bring color to beds filled with hosta, spiraea and Japanese fountain grasses, and scores of pots teeming with brightly hued impatiens crowd the patch of lawn in front of her 1700s farmhouse. "Outside, boldness is awesome," says D'Esopo. "Inside, I like to have a more calming effect with my color."

D'Esopo paints from September to April, but takes off the summer, when she becomes "one hundred percent dedicated to gardening." The



Simsbury native spends 15 hours a day tending to her Avon gardens. Her husband, a retired builder, helps out in the yard ~ D'Esopo estimates that together, the couple spends about eight hours a day watering their extensive collection of plants.

Whereas D'Esopo's gardens once predominantly consisted of colorful annuals, a recent interest in conifers has led her to replace many of her flowers with unusually shaped evergreens that look like they come right out of a Dr. Seuss landscape. Yet, though her gardens are punctuated throughout by the likes of weeping Alaskan cedar and spiral juniper, she still manages to incorporate about 700 pots of annuals into her yard.

In recent years, D'Esopo and her husband have started expanding their gardens up the 2-acre hill behind the house. Though the hill has become somewhat of a showcase for

her conifer collection, the evergreens come in a variety of shades and coexist with strategically placed bright red coleus and other colorful blooms.

"When designing the hill garden, I try to treat it as if it

THE RIGHT NOTES: D'Esopo repeats colors to create rhythm in her side garden. Photo by Chrissie D'Esopo.

were a painting," she says. "I look out there at the hill and I try to get a good mix of the yellows, greens, blues, deep greens and reds." Repeating color, she says, creates a pattern in the landscape and carries your eye across the garden. And the addition of chartreuse and boldly hued flowers serves as a "pick me up" for the other plants, "lifting" the middle green colors. "I try to have a contrast of color and texture. It's the exact same thing I do with my painting."

Georgia Middlebrook, Washington Depot

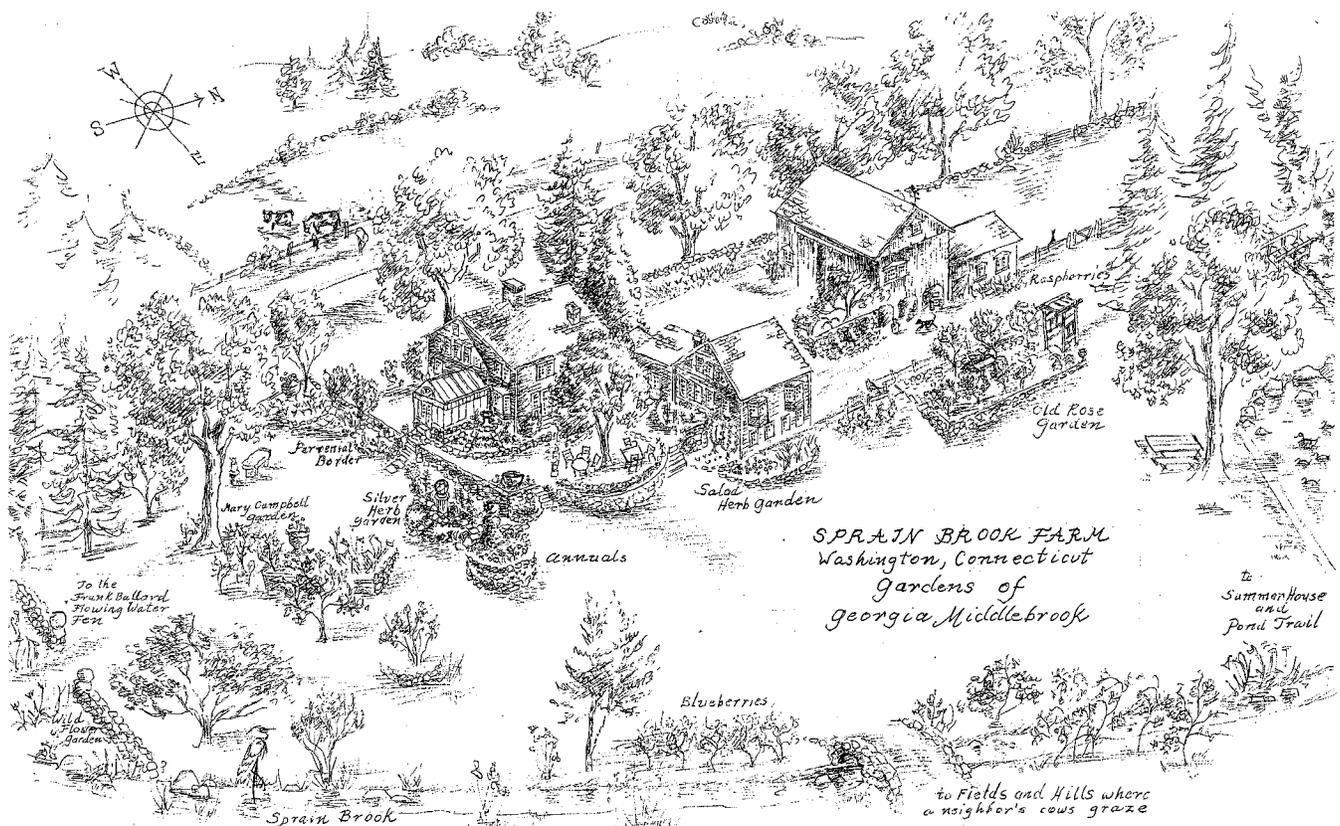
Walk into painter Georgia Middlebrook's studio in Washington Depot and you can't help but see how a lifetime of gardening has influenced her art. Flowers are a frequent motif, appearing in her landscape paintings, filling pots and vases, and adding an extra shot of color to her interiors. Her precise depiction of her floral subjects, whether in acrylic, watercolor or pen and ink, reveals an intimate knowledge of plants - one that has been cultivated over decades of tending to her extensive gardens at Sprain Brook Farm.

For years, the gardens on her 36-acre property were featured on annual Garden Conservancy tours, but last year Middlebrook fell and was unable to do the physical work required to keep up the grounds. Yet a stroll through Middlebrook's garden, which is set against a stunning backdrop of tree-covered hills, reveals a carefully designed landscape of

perennials, annuals, herbs, vegetables, shrubs and trees.

A wild shade garden along the brook that winds through her property teems with spotted pulmonaria, orange-flowering jewelweed, and sunny daisy-like ligularia; in the so-called Silver Garden, a sundial is surrounded not only by silvery-purple Russian sage and Artemisia 'Silver King,' but also by pink and purple phlox; in a slightly overgrown lily garden, graceful lilies mingle with looming stalks of goldenrod; an old rose garden is also home to chicory, rhubarb, raspberries and butterfly bushes, which are attended to by a bevy of colorful butterflies.

Middlebrook, a former commercial artist whose paintings have been featured at several Washington Art Association shows over the years, says she gets many ideas for painting from her garden. "You see a certain color or a certain light in the garden and you try to recreate it in a painting," she says. But at the same time, she notes, her garden is also influenced by her art. "I like to do pen and ink drawings because I like detail, and I'm good at it." This love of detail, she says, carries over into her garden. "Sometimes I do drawings of what I'm envisioning for my garden - for me, drawing how I wanted my gardens to be has been half the fun. Of course, gardens, being flowers and plants, they move, they change. But then, gardens, to me, are never done. They are changing all the time - but they are never done."



PEN AND INK: Georgia Middlebrook's rendering of her gardens at Sprain Brook Farm.



MIXING IT UP: Natural grasses, colorful perennials and potted annuals soften the hardscape in Marianne Berman's poolside garden. Photo by Seshu Photography.

Marianne Berman, Simsbury

"I learned to garden once I had my own home, and I also learned to paint as an adult," says Marianne Berman, as she sits at her drafting table, her brush poised above a watercolor painting-in-progress. "There's an experimental thrill and a sense of achievement in both. And both things make my world prettier."

Berman, a Simsbury-based fitness instructor and professional architectural illustrator, is putting the finishing touches on a grouping of white birches whose stark white trunks stand out in relief against a background of brilliant fall foliage. "Color is important to me in my art ~ and in my gardening," says Berman, who can see her garden through the windows surrounding her workspace. "I want constant color and constant bloom."

In Berman's spring garden, the purples of iris, allium, sage and catmint give way to the yellows of sundrops and 'Moonbeam' coreopsis; in summer, an exuberant mix of hot pink roses, multi-hued lilies, and blue hydrangeas intermingle with other colorful perennials, while pots filled with orange, purple and peach-colored annuals provide additional bursts of color.

PERFECT RENDERING: Berman's architectural illustration of a house in Norwalk, Conn., conveys the artist's love of detail.

Berman has been doing commercial illustrations since 1986. "I actually think my pen and ink architectural illustration is the art that is most connected to my gardening," she says. "I love the way that flowers and landscaping add to – and soften – hard structures, both in my art and in my yard."

Thus, an assortment of morning glories, clematis, and roses climb trellises at every entryway to Berman's house and even above her garage; she hangs flowers on the fence enclos-



ing her backyard – as well as on the gate surrounding her pool mechanicals; and she uses containers to add flowers to the hardscape. “I can move them around to enhance the walkway and to make the pool deck feel like a garden,” she explains. “Everything looks better with flowers on it or in front of it.”

Berman notices many similarities between her two avocations. “I find gardening relaxing and very physical and almost like meditation. Painting, while not as physical, is also meditative in that I’ll start painting and not know where the day went – the same thing happens in my garden.”

Berman is meticulous when it comes to her garden and her artwork. She has, for example, been dogged in her efforts to prevent weeds, insects and skunks from spoiling the sight of purple creeping thyme filling the spaces between the pavers that lead from her driveway to her front yard.

Not surprisingly, meticulous detail characterizes her drawings and many of her watercolors as well. “When I draw a landscape, I will draw every single leaf, every stone, every blade of grass,” she says. “When I paint a seascape, I paint every single rock under the water before I paint the waves over it. As a painter, I’m trying to be less meticulous – and I would like that to carry into my garden, because you can’t control nature and sometimes I have to learn to let go.”

Curt Hanson, Cornwall Hollow

Painter Curt Hanson’s garden abuts an historic 1814 building that in a previous incarnation was the Cornwall Hollow Baptist Church. Now, steeple-less – and topped with solar panels that power the irrigation of the garden – the former house of worship (known today as Cornubia Hall) serves as the artist’s home and studio. Inside, Hanson’s ethereal landscapes of Connecticut and Thailand (his wife Onwarin’s birthplace) grace every available surface – the walls, easels, tables. “Those paintings are right from the garden” Hanson says, indicating four works in varying states of completion.

“I think I’m probably going to leave that one alone, but I’m not sure,” the artist says of his painting of pink perennials

that appears to rise above a cloud of cilantro flowers. “Painting is like tending a garden. If something needs attention, you give it attention, if it doesn’t need attention you leave it alone. The garden tells you what it needs – and so does a painting.” Hanson and his wife have clearly been giving their garden – an eclectic mix of vegetables and blooms – what it needs since 2001, when they first moved to the property.

In one bed, towering sunflowers rise above red dahlias, honeysuckles, and an abundance of dill. In another, peren-



STANDING IN the SUNFLOWERS: Artist Kurt Hanson in his Cornwall Hollow garden. Photo by Seshu Photography.

nials coexist with cilantro and several varieties of basil. There are scallions, kidney beans, bush beans, peppers, and squash. Last August, the couple harvested about 40 pounds of garlic. “We don’t buy vegetables at the store much – even in winter, because we freeze, dry and pickle everything. We have more than we can eat from our garden.”

Not only is the garden a source of food and inspiration, says Hanson, it is almost like another art form. “We put things where we want them – not only for the purpose of what’s best for the plant but also for the purpose of how it looks,” he says. “The garden becomes almost like a painting, because it is designed. People don’t usually think of vegetable gardens that way, but vegetables can be just as beautiful as flowers – Swiss chard, for example, is stunning.”

Hanson’s deep connection to nature is reflected in both



MEET THE ARTIST: Painter Helen Davis in her Glastonbury garden. Photo by Seshu Photography.

his art and his way of life. “Walking around – and working in – the garden is like meditating,” he says. “It’s not so much about thinking as it is about experiencing it, seeing and being aware of things. Everything we need to know about life we can learn from observing nature. All the answers are right here.” To learn more about the artist, go to www.curthansonpaintings.com.

Helen Davis, Glastonbury

Helen Davis leads a visitor from “garden room” to “garden room,” describing her carefully orchestrated combinations of foliage plants and flowers with the kind of knowledge and enthusiasm that reflect decades of gardening experience. “One thing I like to do when gardening is to create vignettes,” says the sprightly septuagenarian. “I try to create a grouping of plants where one plant will echo the color of another plant,” she adds.

Indeed, her property is like a series of living still lifes: a statue of a child holding flowers stands amidst a sea of broad-leaved hosta in her “Hill Garden,” the white edges of the hosta’s foliage picking up the white in a nearby variegated aralia; in the “West Side Garden,” a pale clay pot and a stand of stone mushrooms peek out from a combination of dark green and chartreuse shrubbery.

Though Davis has been gardening around her Glastonbury home for 43 years, she didn’t start creating the pastel landscapes that she now regularly exhibits and sells until after she retired from her work as a therapist in 1995.

“One of the first paintings I did was of the daylilies in my cottage garden,” she says, referring to the plethora of colorful flowers corralled by a picket fence just outside her kitchen door. She says she continues to get ideas for her painting from her garden by observing, say, how the light is hitting a group of plants or flowers.

Conversely, she says, her art clearly influences her garden. “I’m primarily a colorist – I’m attracted to color and I think that is reflected in my garden. I also look for contrast, for the darks and the lights. Your overall composition or design in art is crucial – and that has definitely influenced how I create different areas in the garden.” Davis says that she tries to establish rhythm in the garden by repeating colors throughout a border. In her “Pathway Garden,” for example, swaths of chartreuse and burgundy are punctuated by the blue foliage of blue spruce and miscanthus grass.

But while gardening comes naturally to Davis – “I can get lost in the sense that digging in the dirt is calming” – she says she has to focus when painting. On the other hand, she is more in control of her art. “With painting, you have an idea in your head and to be able to put that on the canvas is the struggle and the fun,” she says. “I also have an idea of how I want my garden to be, but you are hampered by nature and you have to work within the confines of what is there. In painting, you are only hampered by your time and your own internal struggles in getting it right.” ■

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