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Gifts from the garden

Landscapes rooted by careful planning and ingenuity provide respite, create connections, invite reflection and enliven the senses.

BY CYNDI LIESKE

From historic gardens started by Michigan magnates to enchanted pathways and a private Great Lakes getaway, spring landscapes nurture nostalgia and inspiration.

Gardens provide respite and rejuvenation while connecting us to our surroundings. Beach grasses become anchors, native wildflowers trigger memories of sojourns through meadows of long ago, and sandy pathways slowly lead us to the water.

Alluring and varied landscapes trigger reflection, greater awareness and peaceful feelings.

“The greatest gift of the garden,” observed early 1900s writer Hanna Rion Verbeck, “is the restoration of the five senses.”

Peonies from past to present

Ranging in color from snowy white to deep merlot with showy names like Madame Butterfly, Mischief, Fortune Teller and Elfin Pink, peonies bloom in the late spring sun. Fans of their blissful fragrance can indulge at the University of Michigan’s Nichols Arboretum in Ann Arbor, where more than 660 of these double-flower and single-flower heirloom plants — some more than 80 years old — thrive in 27 tidy beds.

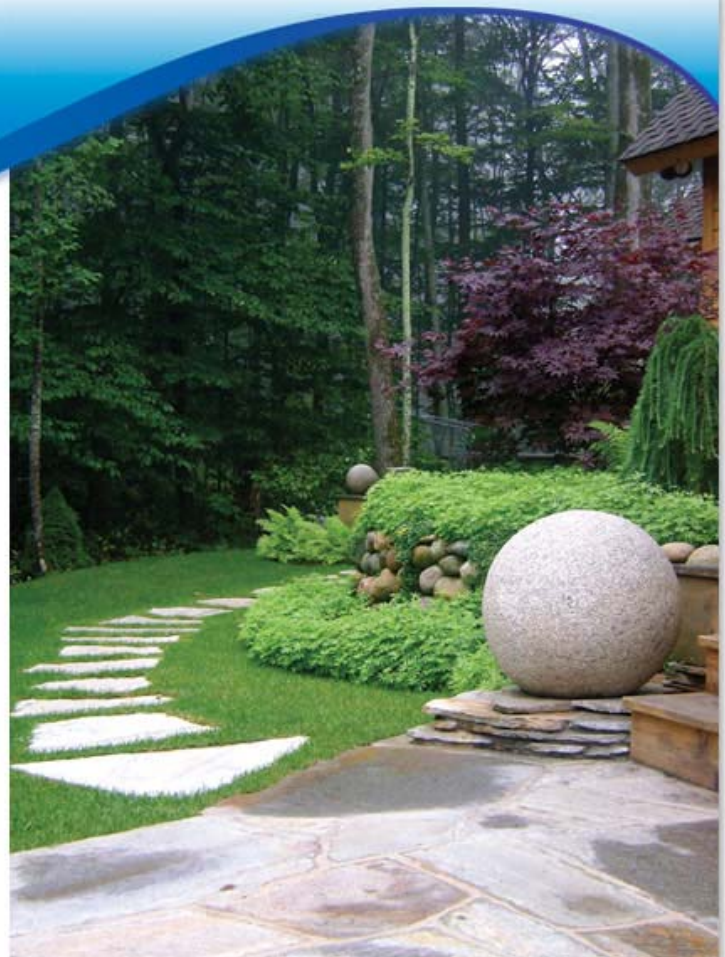
A backdrop for many treasured family photos over the years and one of North America’s largest peony gardens, it began with a bequest from Upjohn pharmaceutical founder, Dr. William Upjohn.

“In some respects, the peony is in line with iris, daffodils and other flowers people associate with old-fashioned gardens and plants that they both remember growing up with and tend to still like,” said Robert Grese, director of the Nichols Arboretum. “For a good part of their history, peonies were bred as cut flowers and for their fragrance.

“The more recent landscape varieties tend to be brighter and have stronger stems, but they have lost some of the size of the flower and some of the fragrance, so the old varieties are still favored by some.”

Historic maps, drawn about every 10 years, show the peonies’ placement and changes over the years, Grese said. There’s room for up to 800 individual plants and more than 250 varieties. Cultivars from Germany, France, Japan and North America are found here.

“Peonies are really the herald of spring,” shared Carmen Tracey, a peony garden intern at the arboretum. “They start coming out in late April, beginning of May — one of the first big blooms of the year — and you can just watch them unfurl their leaves. It’s exciting to see, and they



smell so good.” A resistance to cold and overall hardness, she added, makes peonies a favorite for easy home gardens.

“They’re such showy flowers and they’re relatively easy to grow,” Grese observed. “Once they are established, they really take very little care, and they can last forever.”

Tracy added that peonies travel easily from one home site to another.

“They can be passed down through the family and shared with your friends,” she said. “You don’t have to take the whole plant; just take a section of the root.”



Pathways of discovery

Buried and barely visible cobblestone, smooth slate slabs, gravelly paths, and mossy walkways are designed to lead cottage-dwelling explorers on new adventures.

On one path, woolly thyme and bright green sedum spill into the spaces between hulking slabs of slate. On another, Chilton stone creates a path from home to a small side yard garden.

“A fragrance or anything tactile — from stone to moss to the seed head of a flower that has already had its day — can stimulate a memory and create a connection for us to our environment,” noted Sheridan Jones, a Harbor Springs-based landscape architect. “These organic elements become anchors.”

Senses awaken while traveling a path, she said. Gnarly roots at the base of an ancient-looking tree, open meadows full of wildflowers and swaying dune grass can spark recollections of soothing yesterdays. But whether pathways are leading a few steps from a kitchen door to a backyard herb garden, winding a mossy route to the garage or forming a long boardwalk to the beach, these character-rich landscape elements can be functional as well.

“Depending on the length of the path and what sort of environment we’re going through, it’s also nice to lend pathways an element of secrecy or mystery,” Jones added. “If you can’t see the end of the path, it’s always fun to wonder, ‘What’s around this corner?’”

A number of unique paths found in one residential landscape setting invites daily discovery.

“Each site has its own features,” Jones observed. “To me, that translates to making a set of outdoor rooms that flow naturally from area to area, quiet and serene, spaces that might have contemplative areas with tables, chairs and benches rolling into a smaller-scale lawn or ground cover area. It can have little nooks and crannies where you can feel comfortable and not be observed.”

Simply meandering along a footpath can be rejuvenating, she said.

“It’s a strong meditative journey, really,” Jones noted. “When you are on that kind of a walk in the woods, it isn’t a speed walk.”

Gardens through a grand estate

Like hidden jewels tossed amid the woodlands, trout lily with its golden petals, May apple with glossy broad leaves and other Michigan wildflowers are making a comeback in Dearborn. The flowers, found at the 72-acre Henry Ford Fair Lane Estate, a National Historic Landmark (bottom, opposite page), are some of the first to bloom in the spring.

Plucking out invasive species such as common buckthorn and garlic mustard is enabling their return.

“We’re starting to see more and more of the Michigan wildflowers coming back in,” observed Karen Marzonie, landscape architect/manager at Fair Lane. “It is a little bit of a treasure hunt.”

A 1.4-mile walking tour of the estate, where Thomas Edison, Charles Lindbergh and President Herbert Hoover visited, wends along the Rouge River and through rose gardens, former pear and apple orchards, ponds, and some of Michigan's oldest beech and maple trees. Jens Jensen, landscape designer for many Frank Lloyd Wright homes, designed Fair Lane to provide an idealized homestead for the Ford Motor Co. founder in a natural setting that lent itself to a variety of recreational activities such as hiking, sleighing, bird watching, gardening and skating.

Surrounding the mansion built by Henry and Clara Ford in 1915, the estate is open until 6 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, and provides a natural, calming retreat in the center of urban Dearborn.



"Visitors to the estate gardens and grounds often comment how surprised they are that such a large, quiet, natural area has been retained within the urbanized area of southeast Michigan," Marzonie said.

"The natural play of light and shadow during the late afternoon, created by woodland edges next to the open lawns — as planned by Jens Jensen — is certainly one of the features that draw people out into these gardens."

As a metaphor for life, Jensen set up symbols along the trail gardens — sheltering trees to represent parents, an open meadow to represent adulthood, and a curved path with the sun setting to represent later years, according to research by former Fair Lane director Donn Werling, Marzonie added.

"As you work in the landscape, you have time to ponder these kinds of thoughts," she reflected. "There is this poetic aspect to it."



Pool of ingenuity

Just south of Muskegon, a landscape designer and pool builder teamed up to fashion one of Lake Michigan's most innovative residential retreats.

Three waterfalls and bubbling jets casting patterns across a rippling blue surface create a cocoon of sound, inviting relaxation. Bordered by boulders of Michigan fieldstone and native granite that meld this multi-level pool to its shoreline surroundings, the gently rippling water (also visible through a glass wall in the pool) adds a new dimension of life.

Fire elements — including a hot tub, fireplace and two towers with fire bowls — lend warmth. And a swim-up bar

and patio with dance floor further beckon homeowners and their guests to this Great Lakes getaway.

But a dip into the pool offers a surprise: Just where the pool ends and Lake Michigan begins remains in question.

"You don't realize it's an infinity pool until you get in it," explained Michael Pare, the pool's builder and president of Blue Water Pools of Grand Rapids. "All you see is water when you look across that edge."

The structure's custom-designed charcoal color, crafted of ground quartz blended with cement, creates an inky surface that lightens when filled with water.

"We used a dark pool surface to lend more mystery, and also to visually blend the pool with the lake," shared Matthew Schmuker, landscape designer and owner of Grand Rapids-based Apex Landscape. "When you combine the reflection of the sky with this dark surface, it results in this really deep blue pool water that feels like a natural extension of Lake Michigan."

Purple Moor Grass, Little Bluestem, Pennsylvania Sedge and lavender create a haze of purple and blue surrounding the pool. Sunset Cloud sedum fills in the space between the taller plants.

“I wanted to keep the coastal feel,” Schmuker shared. “When you look at a natural landscape on Lake Michigan it is basically beach grass. I wanted to give it some contrast and texture.”

On calm days the pool is a looking glass.

“The pool becomes a mirror of the sky above,” said Pare. “In my mind, it isn’t just for recreation — it’s not just a body of water. A pool can be a piece of art.” ≈

Cyndi Lieske is a Howell-based freelance writer.
