

Star Gardener

BY ABBY JANE BRODY

Visiting a new garden at an old farmhouse in Sagaponack with a friend who had "discovered" it, I sensed as soon as we entered the parking area, enclosed by espaliered fruit trees, that there would be a slight European touch to what lay ahead.

Walking through the espaliers into the rear of the house it became clear that one of the owners, at least, was French. Three beds paralleling the grape arbor outside the kitchen were a froth of lavender and soft blues. But it took a closer look to realize that within the masses of blue flowers, this was an herb garden.

Looking toward the old house from the rear of the beds, I felt I was in the midst of an Impressionist painting. With my back toward the house, again



Black hollyhock *Alcea nigra*

I felt I was in a meadow, but beyond was a lawn anchoring and balancing the space. It opens onto a "real" meadow that extends in the distance to a horse pasture.

We Americans tend to think of herb gardens as circular or square quadrants with perhaps a birdbath or sundial on a pedestal in the center with paths of brick. You know, the colonial and Williamsburg look.

This Sagaponack garden was different. I diligently took notes, and returned a few days later to take photographs. All the while the garden kept teasing my

brain. I couldn't let it go or figure it out. Suddenly, an epiphany.

I remembered Alfonso Ossorio's garden at The Creeks in East Hampton. The modernism of his design, which I was unable to see while actually walking through his garden, leaps out of photographs of it.

That was when it dawned on me that this herb garden combines American, French, and English elements. It is functional, standing just outside the kitchen door. But most important, it is very much of the 21st century. It takes traditional elements and twists them into something new, sophisticated, and inspired.

The clients had hired Elizabeth Lear Landscape Associates of Southampton after seeing a swimming pool the firm had designed at the Designer Showcase at the Siena Spirituality Center in Water Mill two years ago. Ms. Lear and her associate Brian Mahoney, a landscape architect, created a site plan for the entire property.

"I take my inspiration from my clients," Ms. Lear said. They visited local garden centers and it became clear their favorite colors were blue, purple, and black.

"I wanted the herb garden to be bedded out to showcase the meadow beyond," she said. The three rectangular beds are, to me, what gives the garden its 21st-century twist. From the distance, they are clearly three separate spaces with espaliered trees at one end and a wide lawn on the other. If you change your angle the three beds appear to merge into a single billowy, romantic space.

Each of the beds is sharply edged for definition, with a lavender hedge and a small, carefully clipped sphere of the true dwarf boxwood, *Buxus sempervirens Suffruticosa*, at each corner. Taking a tip from such English gardens as Sissinghurst, the interior of the beds is a riot of informally planted flowers and herbs.

The lavender is a new one to me, and





What makes these perennial beds different is that they also serve as herb and vegetable gardens.

Abby J.

one you should try. It is called Lavandin or Silly Dilly, is propagated by the whole perennial firm Plantage, and can be found at Marders or ordered through her retail garden centers. The silver foliage is compact, while the violet spikes of flowers are carried on long stems. Brushing against the border was enough to release that wonderful lavender scent. Last winter was brutal to most ever foliage plants, but Ms. Lear says Silly Dilly came through in fine condition.

The two beds nearest the house are densely planted with the tall *Ageratum* blue Horizon that puts out soft blue

powder puffs all summer long without stopping. The shadier parts of the beds take their blue from *Campanula* Kent Belle, a vigorous, upright plant with large, reflowering, dark purple-blue nodding bells. It looks like it may have some *punctata* species in its background, so you would need to keep a close eye on its attempts to travel.

Two very large, old rose of Sharon bushes overhang part of the outermost bed, giving it more shade. Spearmint, the *campanula*, and a mass of a special violet-colored cleome from James Topping in Wainscott fill that bed in its

shady side. Fennel, cilantro, a variety of basil, chives, and dill are in the sunnier portion. Amazingly, the dill re-emerged after the winter and is at least six feet high.

It is not immediately apparent, but Ms. Lear explained that some symmetry was built into the beds. At each corner of the first bed are large clumps of the black hollyhock, *Alcea nigra*. The two other beds are divided into thirds by clumps of the soft yellow hollyhock, *Alcea rugosa*.

Weaving through the *ageratum* in the front bed are various types of thyme, annuals, and a violet and black bearded iris that proved irresistible. A mass of flowering golden oregano billowed over one side of the middle garden, butting up against clumps of ruby chard. There are other types of oreganos, sages, and kohlrabi, whose steely blue and pink colors are ravishing against the lavender border.

The feyness of this herb garden is fitting. The farmhouse had been the home of Henry Golightly, who is buried in the nearby cemetery. Truman Capote used to visit regularly, and it is said that Holly Golightly in "Breakfast at Tiffany's" was based on Henry.

Visiting the garden was immensely satisfying, especially after I finally sort-

ed out its cues. If you are a garden designer and mainstay, I'd like to share a study of different styles through the ages, visit with me, be sensitive to your own, let your imagination loose. You, too, can have a garden of a different century.

