

A GARDEN STATE OF MIND

You can adapt whatever piece of land you have so that the plot thickens—with flowers, shrubs, vegetables, and even butterflies.

by ALISON BLANK

WHEN ASKED TWO TOP NEW JERSEY GARDEN and landscape designers, Lisa Mierop of Mierop Design and Chris Cipriano of Cipriano Landscape Design, what's new this year. The overarching answer: think green. It's a theme that speaks to the universal desire to live healthy and happy lives and the growing recognition that we need to do so in an environmentally responsible way.

Lisa Mierop has been thinking green-scapes since the day in 1992 when, as an inexperienced gardener, she took a shovel to her own Montclair yard. After months of toil, she achieved an extraordinary transformation. Her dusty, sloping yard had become a sun-dappled glen of layered plantings. It won her a prestigious award and provided the impetus to study garden and landscape design at the New York Botanical Garden. Today, with sixteen years of hands-on experience, her Montclair company designs and builds projects of all sizes. Her signature style: natural, romantic, unfussy.

In 1989, Chris Cipriano was a man with a hedge trimmer in his hand operating a one-man landscape business. Now his Ramsey-based company employs about 30 people on projects ranging from \$100,000 to millions of dollars. The growth reflects both the quality and complexity of the

company's work.

Both designers have benefited from the fact that people are spending more time outdoors, and they want to use their outdoor spaces to play, cook, swim, entertain, and, not least, contemplate nature. Their tips:

Use fewer chemicals and more natural alternatives. Decreasing use of toxic chemical products is smart for our water supply, for wildlife, and for the rest of the environment. Look for organic fertilizers and natural pest-control products. Purchase worm castings and soak them in water for a natural fertilizer. Buy a composter or set up your own composting area to recycle yard and kitchen waste.

Choose hardy plants and shrubs, like cherry laurels and hollies, which are less subject to insect attack and blight, and therefore require fewer chemicals.

Conserve water and energy—including your own. Ask the nursery which plants can survive less frequent watering in the conditions that prevail in your garden. If you use an irrigation system, change the settings after it rains and adjust them by the season.

Think low maintenance. For example, don't plant privet hedges, which require frequent pruning, or hybrid tea roses, which need constant vigilance against pests and disease and last only part of the season. David Austin roses, on the other hand, are known for their disease resistance, and they bloom repeatedly during the season. Grasses, smoke bush, and sparkleberry look different in each season and require little upkeep.

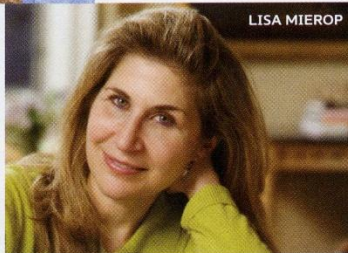
Preserve and enhance what you inherit. Keeping mature trees makes good sense. They provide shade and aid soil retention. Mature trees, especially hardwoods, offer graciousness and scale that often cannot be replaced at any price. Incorporate them into designs instead of removing them.

Whether you inherit a sloping terrain, a babbling brook, or a rocky cliff, Lisa Mierop believes that you should work with the features of your property rather than trying to flatten them out or make them more uniform or conventional. Not only will you save

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CHRIS CIPRIANO



LISA MIEROP

PISTIL PACKIN': Top row: a hummingbird, a children's garden, nasturtiums. Middle row: a fire pit, a David Austin rose, a birdbath. Bottom row: composting, ornamental grasses, a smoke bush.

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time and expense, you will also enhance the very qualities that make your site unique.

Cipriano urges gardeners to save time and money by reusing the soil they have rather than stripping and replacing it. Soil can be improved with an infusion of humus and, in northern New Jersey, sand. As Mierop says, "Properly preparing and enhancing the soil you have may take time and money, but it's like buying insurance for the future health and beauty of your garden."

Grow your own. Nothing tastes better than vegetables from your own garden. Heirloom varieties offer not only a range of heightened flavors and colors (tomatoes especially), but provide the satisfaction of preserving a piece of the past.

Lisa Mierop's partner on many of her projects, Frank Contey of Terra Graphic Design, notes that parents are beginning to commission gardens specifically for their children. These provide a place for kids to get their hands dirty while learning valuable lessons. They'll discover that vegetables actually come from seeds, not a supermarket!

A child's garden needn't be large. Consider plants that have big seeds (easy for little hands to sow), flower relatively quickly (semi-immediate gratification), and bloom big (for wow factor). Sunflowers, nasturtiums, and even corn fit the bill.

Tempt the birds and the bees. And the butterflies, too. They all visit plants that attract them. To attract song birds, choose plants that produce seeds and berries. Provide a fountain or birdbath. Hummingbirds are drawn to brightly colored flowers with nectar, such as honeysuckle and trumpet vine. Butterflies like hollyhocks and, appropriately enough, the butterfly bush.

Make your garden your own. In previous years, garden palettes tended to be subtle and subdued. This year, colors are bold—bright orange (Gaillardia "Dazzler"), vibrant blue (Scabiosa "Butterfly Blue"), and black (black iris, "Starling" daylily). Find inspiration by visiting arboretums and plant nurseries, and go on garden tours.

Plants that don't flower are also important. Choose species with variegated foliage and interesting colors and shapes.

Design beds so they curve; design paths

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so they wander. These curved lines draw the eye and beg you to follow and explore.

Add jewels to your garden. Garden jewels come in all sizes. Whether a water element, such as a fountain or small pond, or a piece of antique statuary, a single feature or accessory can transform an entire space.

While containers may be the only planting environment possible on a patio or balcony, they are equally desirable in a garden. They can brighten a corner, outline a section, and attract the eye. An endless variety of plants can thrive in containers, from a single coleus to an olive tree.

Regard house, garden, and landscape as one seamless whole.

Both Mierop and Cipriano encourage homeowners to think about how each indoor and outdoor space affects the others. How do you want to use the space? Do you want a place to cook or to contemplate? What kinds of elements would please you? A water feature or a fire pit? What kind of constraints are there? Do you have three dogs that romp outdoors or a stream that overflows every spring?

When Mierop meets with a client, she also studies the house and the land. Her goal is to create a garden or multiple spaces that relate to the whole. She wants these spaces to look as if they've been there for years.

Cipriano urges homeowners to research municipal codes. Some localities regulate what percentage of property can be covered by so-called hardscape. That paved circular driveway you put in this year may preclude putting in a pool next year.

Have patience. Contey urges homeowners and gardeners to approach large projects in phases. This provides an order in which things should be done, and affords the gratification of accomplishing things over a period of time. Along the way, you might revise your plans or come up with better ideas, not to mention spare yourself an aching back and give your pocketbook a breather. ■