



Private Edens

BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY GARDENS

JACK STAUB

photographs by ROB CARDILLO



GIBBS SMITH

TO ENRICH AND INSPIRE HUMANKIND

DEVELOPING INTEREST

*St. Davids, Pennsylvania
Construction by Cherokee Construction*

As one drives along a meandering country road on the Main Line outside of Philadelphia, one passes a real anomaly of a house set high on a slope above a pastoral greensward dotted with two ponds. In this particular neck of the Pennsylvania woods, the greatest number of homes, old and new, are of a traditional clapboard and fieldstone personality. Not this one. For surely this is a boy's-eye view of heaven with a modernist twist: a spectacular Zen tree fort of a home on 2.5 steeply terraced acres overlooking an idyllic 20 acres of preserved open space below.



The owner, a local realtor and developer, specializes in the purchase and subdivision of some of the noble early twentieth-century estates that still populate the region, and this property is no exception.

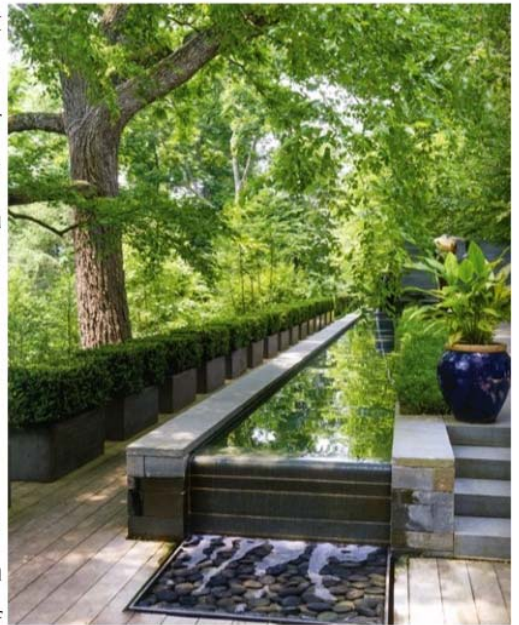
The old mansion still exists on one secluded lot along with the fifty-nine other homes that populate the 100-acre parcel. The developer retained the two most auspicious lots for himself and, defying the local vernacular, built a soaring edifice of pale stucco, lead-coated copper, and glass in a style as severe and uncompromising as a schoolmarm's rod.

Needless to say, this demanded a highly original garden, and to that end this owner wisely sought out the pioneering landscape

design firm of Stephen Stimson Associates. Their goal, according to their literature, is "to create enduring, innovative landscapes" characterized "by minimalism and a modern aesthetic," with their designs being defined by "an elegant simplicity which is reinforced by careful attention to materials and detailing.

The result is a marriage made, well . . . in paradise.

As the owner explains, the greatest challenge in the construction of both house and garden were the 20 to 25 percent grades along the property, a feature that made for splendid views but unique problems in the development of usable exterior space. Stimson Associates solved the problems by constructing a series of retaining walls and terraces linked by stairways that fall to each side of the house, then below it. Bluestone and teak were the materials of choice and the results are fantastic.



Massive walls of stacked bluestone slabs contain and define, giving onto rigidity linear sets of bluestone steps, which lead one from one stone and teak terrace to another. The pitch is so steep and the house so tall that one enters on the second floor and it seems as if one could step out of any room on any level onto a terrace. If all this sounds a little “cool” in personality, it gets even cooler. For, in this vision of Eden, there is water everywhere, built into the hardscape as integrally as the bluestone.



Here a rill crowns the top of a wall, then spouts into a square, river rock-filled pool below. There a swimming pool creates a waterfall at its infinity edge that cascades down the face of another massive bluestone wall, then into a grate to be recirculated. And there a rectangular reflecting pool is

fed by a series of jets sprouting from the bluestone slab retaining wall above it. One feels as though it is all interconnected: a single flow of water moving from space to space, falling here, filling there, always moving, and reflecting the sky and the canopy of greenery overhead.

The planting palette is as strictly limited as the architectural choices. Ancient trees that were part of the original estate landscape plan in the 1930s surround the property, a thick grove of pines girdling it on the uphill side and a mammoth black walnut extending its graceful limbs downslope, truly giving the house the aspect of being built in the treetops.



As one enters the property, pairs of river birch stand sentry in rectangular beds piercing the simplicity of a green lawn. Dense geothermal patches of pachysandra frame walkways and edge terraces. Strict rectangles of box and yew create a green interest that mirrors the austere architecture of the home and hardscape. Handsome ceramic pots arranged in groupings and filled with tropical and exotics add color and texture. A small potager emulates the greater garden with bluestone-edged beds and ranks of zinc planters.

Hovering above the pool, an immense wall of glass is all that separates the master bedroom's state-of-the-art shower from the sky and the leafy embrace of the black walnut.

Sleek bronze sculptures and carefully chosen furniture populate the outdoor spaces in perfect complement. Massive rain chains add interest as they descend from the eaves of the house into circular concrete cisterns filled with black river rock.

What is most thrilling about this modernist Eden is the way it feels completely private while existing in the midst of a sixty-home community and commanding such remarkable views across the open space and ponds to the road below it. And, also, the fidelity of every choice and detail to this owner's unique vision.

And how does the owner feel about the paradisiacal result?



*"I find it very peaceful and
a wonderful place to
Relax
Think
Entertain
and
Simply enjoy
with friends and family."*

And finally, his words of wisdom in developing one's own Eden:

"Have a vision and use the best professionals that you can find."