

Garden Of Magical Juxtapositions

Pre-Revolution Farmhouse Plays Dramatic Role

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THE GRAY GARDEN is a formal parterre just outside the Hollister House. Owner George Schoellkopf says the hedges are not to keep anyone out but "to frame things." (RICHARD MESSINA / HARTFORD COURANT / June 24, 2008)

To step into the garden at Hollister House is to be transported to a place of enchantment. The ethereal creation of George Schoellkopf inspires the awe one might feel riding on a flying carpet. Here, though, the magic is not of woven textiles that travel through the air but of exuberantly colorful interwoven plantings

one meanders through on foot.

The garden's pathways are strewn with pleasant surprises and juxtapositions, and the vistas are spectacular.

"You're in a civilized environment, but it's all gone kind of wild," says Schoellkopf, who purchased the 25-acre property in [Washington](#), Conn., in 1978 and named it after Gideon Hollister, the Colonial-era builder who put up the pre-Revolution saltbox farmhouse there.

Now in his mid-60s, Schoellkopf still has a drawl that reveals his roots in [Texas](#), where he was introduced to gardening at an early age by his mother and his sister, who remains an avid gardener in Dallas.

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When he bought Hollister House, Schoellkopf was a collector and dealer of 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century American decorative and folk art, and he restored and decorated the house in authentic 18th-century style.

As for the garden, Schoellkopf harbored fantasies of an English landscape. But he knew he would have to temper them with the realities of his New England site's wooded hillsides and harsh climates — not to mention the rambling house. Visible from various angles throughout the garden, "the house is definitely a player in this whole drama," Schoellkopf says.

His solution was to create a garden that was structured in an architectural sense, but informally planted.

"The garden has its formal moments," Schoellkopf says, but it also "wanders," and no path goes on for very long without turning left or right. "There are lots of right angles."

Another inviting characteristic about Hollister House Garden is that it unfolds in successive layers. A visitor can't see everything all at once but can definitely sense that something wonderful awaits on the other side of each hedge and wall.

The hedges, which vary in height, "are designed not to keep you out, but to frame things," Schoellkopf says, and they force you to explore the terrain. As he puts it, "There's order among chaos."

Still, the structure is designed to give the plantings freedom — there's a profusion of color and foliage and unusual combinations of common and exotic plants — but they relate to one another in color, texture, height and form.

"Symmetry is different in this garden," Schoellkopf says. "I strive for balance, instead."

When it comes to color, for example, Schoellkopf regards yellow and pink together as analogous "to fingernails on a blackboard. I try to keep them away from each other."

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After more than two decades of building garden terraces and walls, and experimenting with plants in his area of the Connecticut landscape, Schoellkopf has preserved his private garden in perpetuity for the benefit of the public. The Garden Conservancy, which was founded in 1989 to preserve exceptional gardens for the public's enjoyment, is helping him donate it to a nonprofit trust.

Schoellkopf also participates in the national nonprofit conservancy's Open Days Program. Next weekend, Hollister House Garden and five other Litchfield County gardens will be open to visitors, and Hollister House also will host a garden study weekend.

People need not have a great knowledge of gardening to enjoy visiting Hollister House, which, with its layers of space and color, its 8- to 10-foot walls, its dramatic hedges, winding brook and large pond, Schoellkopf likens to a "series of secret gardens."

"Children adore the garden; I think it fosters in them a sense of exploration," he says, recalling a 7-year-old who compared it to Disneyland.

That's something the garden's creator relishes. "I sort of like to feel like a little kid in my own garden," he admits. "I sort of feel hugged in my garden."

Even the frogs at Hollister House Garden seem happy and healthy, swimming in a pond as Schoellkopf walks past.

"Frogs," he says, "are a bellwether of their surroundings."