

CTC & G

Connecticut Cottages and Gardens

COTTAGESGARDENS.COM | SEPTEMBER 2021

NEW SEASON OF
STYLE





Tranquil Setting
The recently restored property includes new terracing around the villa and an oval pool with a glass mosaic tile interior. See *Resources*.



REIMAGINING AND RESTORING
THE GARDENS SURROUNDING AN
ENCHANTING LAKE COMO VILLA

ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES DOYLE



Bella Vista (CLOCKWISE ACROSS SPREAD FROM OPPOSITE PAGE) The main pathway that leads to the villa is lined with ceanothus and New Zealand flax, and passes a raised bed filled with palms and red geraniums above the boathouse. The entrance to the boathouse is located at the far end of the pool, which is backed by a wall of aromatic jasmine. See *Resources*.

Lake Como

has been called the most beautiful lake in the world and is known for its prestigious villas and villages. It is a dreamy destination, and when a client asked if I would be interested in working with them on their newly purchased villa, there was only one answer! The real estate listing described their purchase as an “enchanted fairytale Lake Como villa with boathouses and gardens.” The home sits in a bay midway between Como and Bellagio. It was built in the 1920s, transforming a villa from a much earlier period, but the home and property had fallen into a state of disrepair. Many of these villas have admirable gardens, so who could resist an opportunity to restore this one to its former glory?

The journey that began in 2013 was finally completed last year, and truthfully, none of us could have envisioned the challenges and rewards this project would bring. Upon my first visit, I was overwhelmed and disoriented by the condition of the gardens, but totally enchanted by the character and beauty of the property. With all credit to my clients, they assembled a wonderful team of architect, contractors and specialists, and stayed the course with a dedication to a once-in-a-lifetime project of restoration and renovation.

This property has more than 400 yards of lake frontage with exceptional views, and, like most of the lake’s waterfront villas, the land rises quickly and

steeply. This terrain provides challenges, but because of its microclimate, it can sustain many subtropical and Mediterranean plants. It was an opportunity to work with an exciting plant palette and to create destinations on the property that would allow for differing views of the lake as one traversed about the gardens.

We spent almost two years designing the landscape and coordinating the phasing of the installation. We sourced the stone for all the terraces and pathways, and visited nurseries collecting plant materials. Much work was done to preserve wonderful and sacred trees on site, and construction began in earnest. Ledge and rock removal, site stabilization and restoration of underground streams were major challenges. Because of limited access to most lakeside properties, huge construction cranes were set up, and materials were delivered and removed by barge from the lake. These hurdles were offset by an enthusiasm to see a wonderful project imagined.

Our design was dictated by our client’s needs and desires. With no direct automobile access to the main villa, one arrives at a garage and a beautifully restored guesthouse, then a walk along the entire lake frontage brings you to the villa. Our goal was to ensure a walk with the most beautiful views and plantings to complement this journey. As this is the sunniest area of





Verdant Pleasures (CLOCKWISE ACROSS SPREAD FROM FAR LEFT)
A vegetable and herb garden was designed next to the restored citrus limonaia. The tropical garden includes purple and white flowering rock roses, New Zealand flax, agaves and several varieties of African lilies. The restored grotto. The guesthouse and the grotto walkway. A view of the tropical garden from above. See Resources.



Mille Fiore (THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT)
Flowering plantings include ceanothus, rock roses, an ancient wisteria, aruncus and acanthus. **Tropical Flair** (OPPOSITE PAGE) A wide diversity of plantings—including palm trees and ferns—line the woodland walkway. See *Resources*.



OUR GOAL WAS TO ENSURE A WALK WITH
THE MOST BEAUTIFUL VIEWS AND PLANTINGS
TO COMPLEMENT THIS JOURNEY



the property, our plantings included a tropical garden with windmill palm trees, purple and white flowering rock roses, New Zealand flax, agaves and varieties of African lilies to name a few. Toward the villa, we had a diverse shrubbery collection that included more scented plants, such as Mexican orange blossom, glossy abelia, red escallonia, daisy bush, hydrangeas and mock orange.

Above the main walkway, we created switchback pathways to ease walking the steep slopes of the property. Most of the mature trees we preserved are in these upper areas, so it became a more naturalized woodland garden higher up on the property. Masses of azaleas, sweetbox, skimmias, more hydrangeas and groundcovers were planted to stabilize the woodland floor, while multiple seating areas were established as resting spots to enjoy the views.

In true Italian spirit, a charming grotto was restored along with a citrus limonaia. Next to the limonaia, we restored a vegetable and herb garden, which is tended lovingly by the villa gardener.

A swimming pool was requested, and this was realized and remains one of the most favorite features I have ever designed. Throughout my career I have wanted to design an oval pool, and the setting and space allowed for the perfect opportunity. Nestled lakeside and finished with a glass mosaic interior, it now sits in its own garden space backed by a wall of aromatic jasmine.

This villa, in a truly majestic setting, was the perfect dream project. 🌟

Woodland Walk (CLOCKWISE ACROSS SPREAD FROM OPPOSITE PAGE) Switchback trails run up the hillside from the main walkway to the woodland grotto. The view from above the guesthouse reveals the complexity of the landscape. A restored gazebo provides a resting spot along the pathway above the swimming pool area. See *Resources*.

