

WHERE
THE GREEN
THINGS

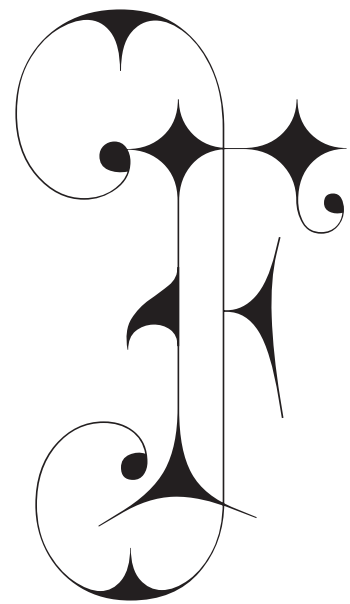
GROW

OVERFLOWING
FLOWERBEDS, WILD
OPEN MEADOWS,
FREE-FLOWING
STREAMS AND
PANDEMIC VICTORY
GARDENS ARE
BRINGING A
CORNUCOPIA OF
JOY AND HOPE TO
HOMEOWNERS
THIS SPRING.

BY TOM CONNOR

UNSLASH

NEW CANON



Few things speak to a new lease on life like the annual migration from the great indoors to the greater outdoors. Now that the days are growing longer and warmer, we're coming back to life along with the perennials from seasons past.

Our hunter-gatherer ancestors roamed for miles to find enough food to sustain them and their tribe in hostile environments. Here in the third year of the pandemic, however, we need only step out the back door armed with hand trowels and gardening hats to sustain our bodies but also reinvigorate our minds and soothe our souls.

This spring, landscape architects and designers across Fairfield County are responding to homeowners' interests—not in manicured lawns and showcase gardens but in sustainability and doing what's best for the environment.

These professionals are ditching the formality of boxwood borders and orderly flower beds for unmade beds, free-ranging meadows, native plantings and water in any number of forms. They're also designing large, handsome vegetable garden structures and offering a range of options for helping homeowners become increasingly self-sufficient and truly at home on the range—even if it's the suburban range.



UNSPLASH



WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

One sign of the new informality is the open meadows alive with swaying grasses, vibrant wildflowers and pollinator plants that attract songbirds, bees and other beneficial insects.

On a less than an acre of land in Westport, Jay Petrow of Petrow Designs created an open meadow of wild grasses—Korea feather grass and fountain grass—that resembles an impressionist painting but one that changes colors as the seasons change. It covers just a 30' by 30' section of the owners' backyard but looks like a bigger planting than it is.

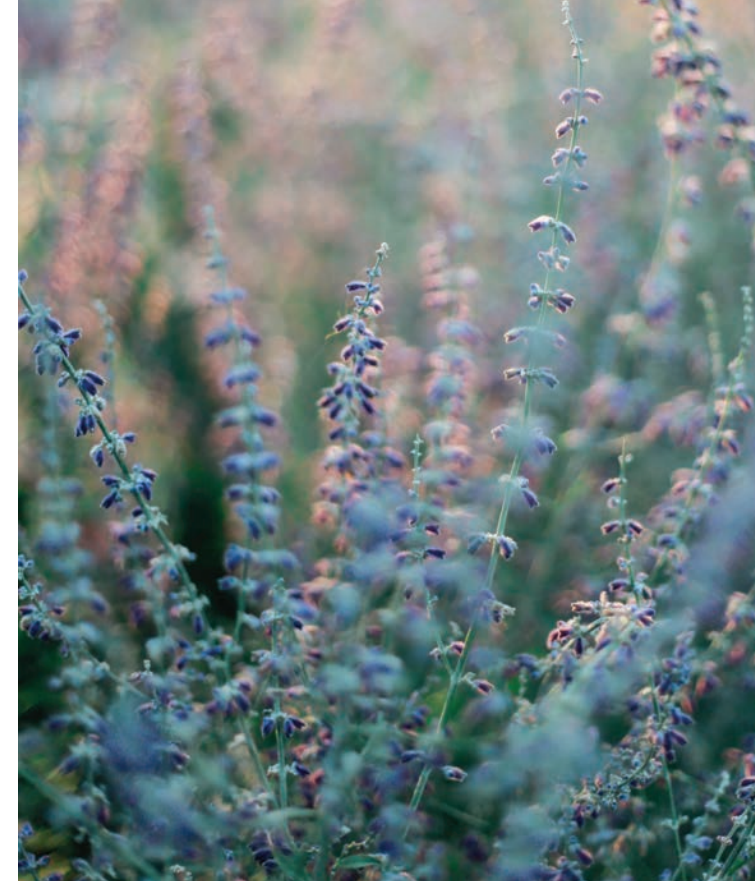
"You don't need to eliminate an acre of grass—you can start with just a small area," says Petrow, who in the off-season creates abstract expressionist paintings that at times are informed by his meadow designs. "Late in the day in the winter when the sun is in that golden time, it hits these grasses and the colors come through. The grasses add texture and color and movement in the wind and can look good through much of the year."

Other landscape designers and professional gardeners report requests for elements that satisfy an almost primitive impulse.

"The proper term I think is probably 'homesteading,' although I think most of our clients don't think of themselves as homesteaders," notes John Carlson of Homefront Farmers in Redding. Carlson's company builds and maintains vegetable gardens as well as other forms of self-sufficiency, "But in fact that's what we're doing when we add beekeeping and maple sugaring, and chicken cooping and mushrooming. We're just expanding the way they can produce food at home."

Even traditional architectural firms that offer landscaping services are loosening their grip on

TOP TWO PHOTOS BY UNSPLASH, COURTESY OF WADIA



Landscape trends are leaning away from the perfectly manicured boxwoods in favor of natural grasses and vegetable gardens that allow homeowners to live off the land.



tradition in a bow to Mother Nature.

New Canaan architectural firm, Wadia Associates designs formal mansions frequently informed by classic British estates, with formal landscapes to match. (As if to verify the firm's commitment to authenticity, Prince Charles, a champion of architectural preservation, contributed the preface to Dinyar Wadia's coffee table volume, *New Classicists: Wadia Associates, Residential Architecture of Distinction*.)

The firm's partial transition away from contained formal gardens reflects a growing sensitivity among homeowners to conservation and a greater appreciation of land and space.

Something new that Wadia clients are asking for is a "live roof"—flat, grassed surfaces, over a series of drainage systems, that aids thermal regulation below and makes that part of the home blend naturally into the landscape.

"The phenomenon of Covid has reminded us that **SPACE IS A LUXURY**. For a long time people were moving away from backcountry in Greenwich and now the desirability of having that kind of land is quite high."

— DINYAR WADIA, WADIA ASSOCIATES

"I think the phenomenon of Covid has reminded us that space is a luxury," Wadia says. "For a long time people were moving away from backcountry in Greenwich and now the desirability of having that kind of land is quite high. They're also looking for more ways that they can engage with the environment organically, literally and figuratively. We have a lot of clients who are asking for greenhouses and gardens—not a formal, boxwood-framed garden but a vegetable garden."



SUBURBAN HOMESTEADING

During World War II, the U.S. government rationed staples and asked citizens to plant “Victory Gardens.” Some 20 million answered the patriotic call, producing fruits and vegetables for themselves and their families.

It’s telling that residential architects and landscape designers today are designing home herb and vegetable patches—“Pandemic Victory Gardens,” if you will—on their own properties.

Southport architect Mark Finlay, whose firm designs 10,000- and 20,000-square-foot mansions, had built for his wife a three-section garden structure of raised beds on a side portion of their property. Andrew Tyrrell of Black Rock Compost Company in Bridgeport custom-built the 20’-by-20’ structure out of rot- and insect-resistant white cedar, which is completely enclosed in 1”-by-1” black deer fencing. Tyrrell’s company also manages the composting for the garden year-round.

“It’s a big garden, so I designed it like a clerestory style, like a church, so the tomatoes & zucchinis are in the middle section and in the wings herbs and lettuces that grow low,” Finlay explains. The center section is nine feet high, the wings seven feet high. Deer fencing covers the top because, as Finlay found, “birds fly in and poke holes in the vegetables, then the squirrels come in and finish the job.”

The space doubles as a retreat from the stresses of life in a pandemic.

“In the middle of the summer when it’s in full bloom,” the architect notes, “it’s like a really quiet Zen room.”



top left: Mark Finlay’s entry design with overflowing greenery.

above and left: James Doyle Designs’ created suburban homesteading where clients could grow veggies and raise chickens.

right: Homefront Farmers’ designed an enclosed garden surrounded by bright florals.



TOP LEFT PHOTO COURTESY OF MARK FINLAY; CHICKEN COUP AND CHIKEN BY ALEGRA ANDERSON; ENCLOSED GARDEN COURTESY OF HOMEFRONT FARMERS



ENCLOSED GARDEN COURTESY OF MARK FINLAY; VEGETABLE GARDEN BY NEIL LANDING



right: Architect Mark Finlay designed and Andrew Tyrrell built this custom garden structure out of white cedar and deer-resistant fencing.

below: A garden design by James Doyle.

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— MARK FINLAY, ARCHITECT



A James Doyle Designs water feature

A STREAM RUNS THROUGH IT

Pools remain a top draw for homeowners, and especially for homebuyers from the City hot to have water in any setting. These are not our parents' pools but rather complex interactions of design, construction and mechanics.

James Doyle Design Associates in Greenwich partners with structural engineers and others to create what he calls “The Moses Effect”—water separated from other water within the same walls of a swimming pool. But water also serves simpler purposes.

“Obviously pools are designed for practical use,” says Doyle, “but water features bring an extra-sensory element to the land that’s very calming.”

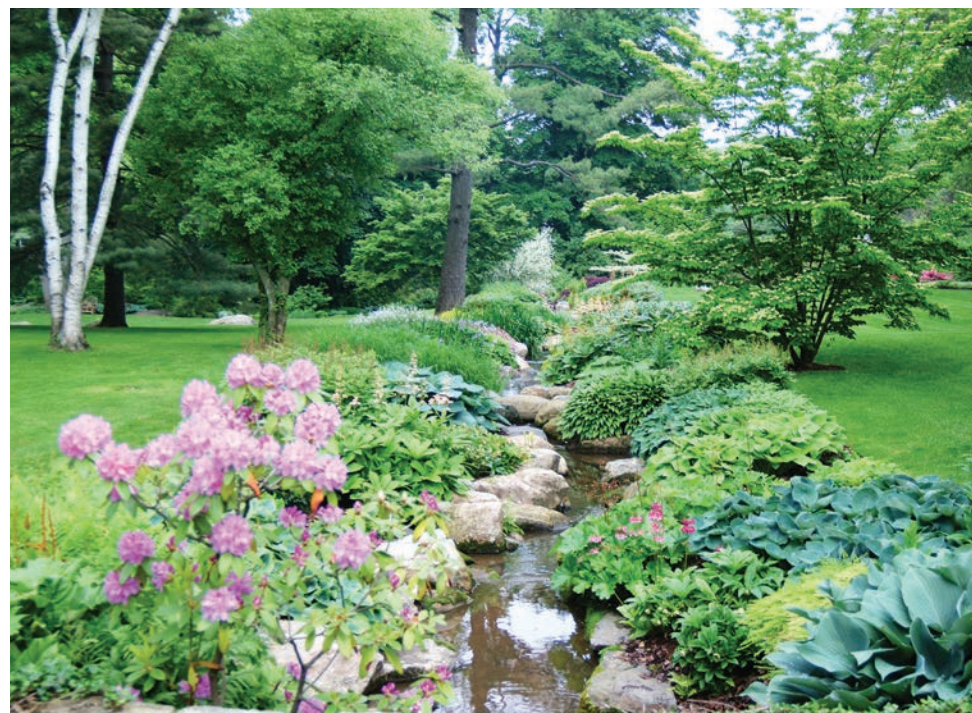
At the entrance to a magnificent French chateau on eight acres, Wadia Associates installed a long reflecting pool that runs under a stone bridge to the front door. Fountains in the entry courtyard, meanwhile, send plumes of water skyward. “The idea was to give the homeowners an immediate sense of tranquility when they come home,” says Wadia. “There’s the gentle sound of water, reflected light and lily pads. It’s a little bit of Monet in Greenwich.”

Meanwhile, streams both natural and man made are primal elements—a lifeforce—that sustain birds, small animals and the human spirit.

To reach a modest house on a small lot in



above: Wadia Associates installed a long reflecting pool that runs under a bridge and to the front of the home for an immediate sense of tranquility. **below:** Another Wadia design showcases a natural stream running through a slew of plantings.



WATER FEATURE BY NEIL LANDING; TOP AND BOTTOM PHOTO COURTESY OF WADIA ASSOCIATES



Native plants and pollinators: Black Eyed Susan, Switchgrass, and Echinacea.



“Pools are designed for practical use but **WATER FEATURES BRING AN EXTRA-SENSORY ELEMENT** to the land that’s very calming.”

— JAMES DOYLE, JAMES DOYLE DESIGN ASSOCIATES

here and above: While pools are still a top priority for homeowners, James Doyle says he has begun to add many more types of water features into his landscape designs to create a feeling of tranquility throughout the properties.

Darien, the owners and visitors drive over a bridge and narrow stream. Jay Petrow removed the pachysandra crowding the banks and in its place, around boulders he had trucked in, put in a wealth of native plants and pollinators: Black Eyed Susan, switchgrass, asters and echinacea, among others.

“I thought that would be a beautiful scene-setter for the property,” Petrow says. “I was excited about changing the landscape from what was basically an ecological desert of lawns and Pachyasandra and boxwood to something that not only looks better to me but benefits the environment.”

Not that a lack of water should be a deterrent. On Dinyar Wadia’s New Canaan property, the man-made stream features a flow regulator that controls the speed of the current and the level of water, which can be lowered during heavy rains. Now that’s what we call a modern water feature.

