



The Evolution of a *Garden*

By Moya Andrews

Photography by James Kellar

Jean and John Donatiello created their garden from scratch over a two-year period, constructing a swimming pool as the centerpiece and surrounding it with paths for strolling.



Unless

they move into a brand new house, homeowners usually inherit some semblance of a garden from those who have lived in the house before them. Garden design frequently involves incorporating new plantings into existing beds and borders and removing or adapting existing features. It is rare that new owners of a previously occupied house inherit a spacious, completely open, unplanted backyard. But that's just what appealed to Jean and John Donatiello when they purchased their home in Bloomington's Sterling Woods.

When presented with an opportunity to create a garden completely from scratch, there are a number of approaches that homeowners like the Donatiellos can follow. Experts often advise that new owners spend some time thinking about the garden's potential since it may take up to a year to observe the space in different seasons and see how the light changes during the day. Conversely, new homeowners may, weather permitting, immediately take up the shovel or solicit sample plans from local landscape architects.



Jean and John Donatiello.

What follows is how the Donatiellos created one particularly lovely garden over a recent two-year period.

Jean and John, who moved to Bloomington from Texas in December 2016, were experienced gardeners who had designed a variety of gardens at their previous homes.

In Austin, they created a winding, half-acre nature trail incorporating woodland animal statuary among native plants and wildflowers. It also featured a butterfly garden. "I love all aspects of garden design," says Jean. "At Sterling Woods, the large expanse of lawn at the back of our new home immediately made me think of boxwoods. I thought of either a glorious fountain or a reflecting pool in the center as a focal point. However, since John is a swimmer, he really needed a good-sized swimming pool. There was a lot to think about, but we were eager to get started the next spring."

The pool, they decided, would be built parallel to the house and surrounded by paths for strolling, flat limestone walls for sitting, two sets of formal garden beds, and a double set of flowerbeds. For the outer flower beds Jean chose *Hydrangea 'Little Lime'* to serve as a lush but neutral backdrop for the boxwood shrubs and the perennial *Veronica 'Giles van Hees'* flowers she selected for the inner beds. After choosing these plantings, Jean searched the internet for pool deck jets that would create the effect of a fountain over the pool.

Her search also found large stone urns made by Haddonstone, an English company that manufactures some garden pieces in Colorado. She selected four squat urns with large openings to display spreading annuals to advantage. She also bought short limestone columns for the urns and the base for a statue—*18th Century Gardener*—that was imported from England.

Once Jean finalized the basic formal garden concept on her iPad, she and John inquired about local landscapers. Derek Zimmerman of Studio Z Landscapes was the Donatiellos'



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1. A backhoe begins excavation for the pool installation. 2. Jean Donatiello shows off her initial formal garden concept, which she designed on her tablet. 3. With the pool liner installed, the limestone wall stones are ready to be put into place. 4. Haddonstone's *18th Century Gardener* statue atop a pedestal overlooking the Donatiellos' garden. The statue is based on an 18th century statue that once stood at Burton Agnes in Yorkshire, England.



A fountain installation surrounded by small boxwoods off the side entrance to the Donatiellos' Sterling Woods home.

choice, and they quickly forged a satisfying partnership with Derek and his team.

Work began in the spring of 2017. Derek used a drone to ensure that the dimensions of the hardscape were correct and that the right angles in the design were perfectly square.

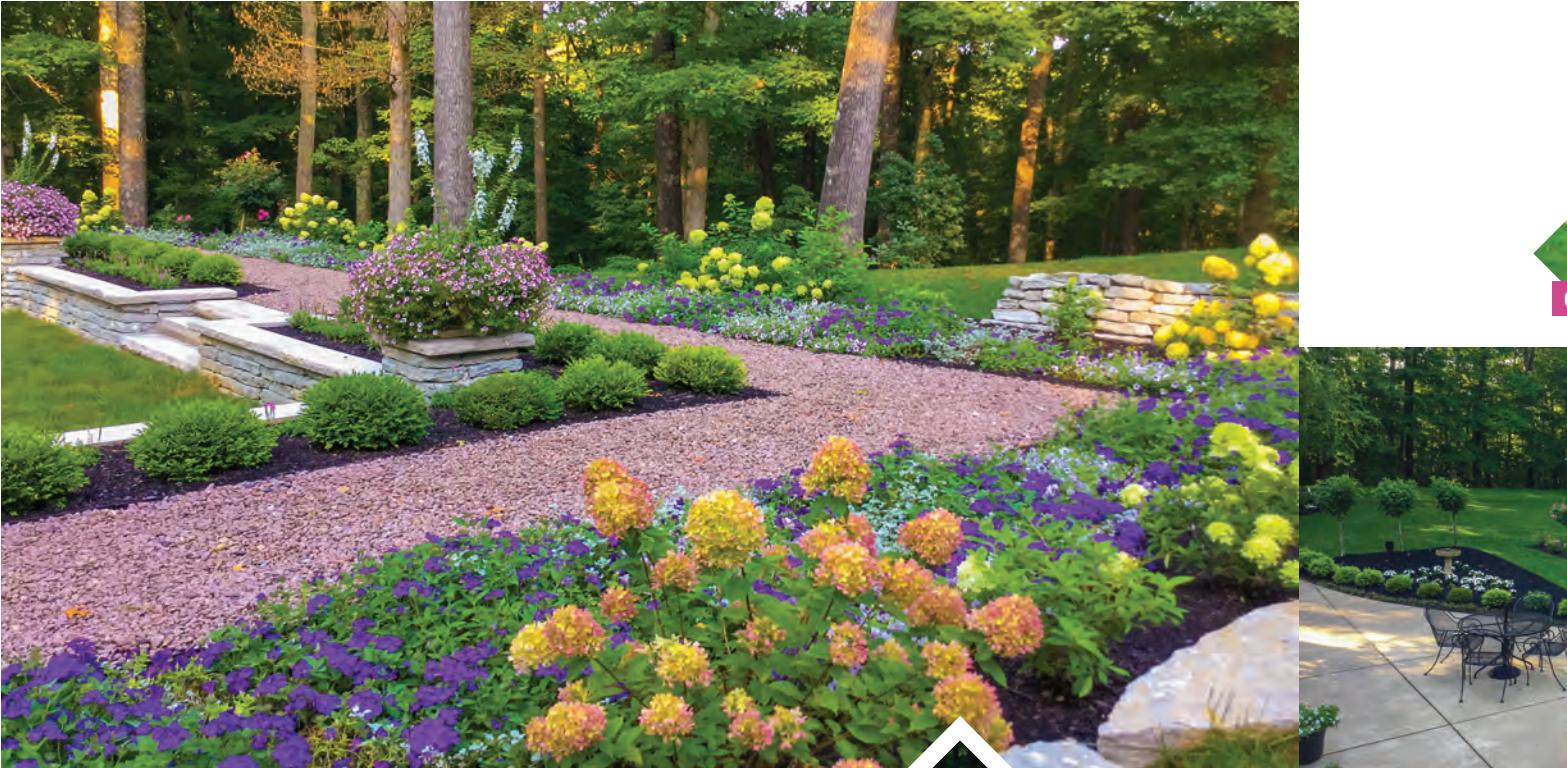
While the area looked flat, it turned out that the property had many grades so it was difficult to get equipment to the worksite. An access path had to be created, which required clearing small trees. It was an exceptionally wet spring and drainage issues emerged, which added to the problem of

moving heavy equipment and materials through wet clay. Installation of the pool was completed successfully, followed by the construction of the limestone sitting walls and columns and gravel paths. By late fall, the pool and formal garden area was complete, and just before the first snow of 2017, the initial framework of boxwood shrubs was in place.

During that winter, Jean looked out of the back windows of her house and wondered about ways to access the lower area behind the formal garden. She envisioned a wide stone stairway, flanked by perennial flowerbeds, leading to a path behind the pool. Derek completed the work on the stairway in the spring of 2018. On the slope behind the pool, he suggested rows of *Vinca minor* ground cover plants to prevent erosion, and Jean added 100 hardy *Geranium 'Rozanne'*.



The fountain area under construction.



The gravel path, lined on the outside by hydrangeas and purple petunias, is suitable for strolling around the formal garden.

Spring 2018 was again extremely wet, delaying installation of the sod. It also caused the first batch of annuals to rot as there was so much standing water. Derek installed many drains in areas that were vulnerable to pooling water. He also added compost and other soil amendments, which helped the second batch of plants take root. All of the hydrangea shrubs went into the garden that spring, and since hydrangeas like water, they thrived in the wet soil. Other shrubs took up residence, too.

Jean's plan for the overall color scheme of the formal garden involved a bouquet of pastels with purples, pinks, and whites for both the urns and the flowerbeds.

Dark pink, single-bloom, standard roses that look like small trees were installed at the

corners of the formal garden. Planted beneath them were double 'Knock-Out' rose bushes. When Japanese beetles attacked the roses in June, it was the single-bloom roses that they preferred to eat. Jean removed the beetles daily by hand and put them into a jar of soapy water. Once the formal garden plantings were installed, attention was directed to the informal shaded woodland areas at the back of the garden. Many different varieties of hosta were planted there. At the side of the house, climbing hydrangeas were artfully used to disguise the structure that houses the pool equipment, and creepers such as Creeping Jenny and Lamb's Ears were placed so they would drape over the walls and soften the stone.

Most of the newly planted perennials and shrubs grew and thrived during the



5. A layered bed of Lamb's Ears, New Guinea Impatiens, and 'Endless Summer' hydrangeas. 6. A limestone urn brimming with Persian Shield, Nicotiana, Heliotrope, and Bacopa. 7. Looking toward the woodland garden from the upper terrace of the home. 8. The Donatiellos' formal garden and home as seen from the southwest corner of the garden.



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summer of 2018. That fall, Jean met with Carol Hall from Hall's Greenhouse to review the varieties of annuals that would be available the following spring and to place an order since the Donatiello garden was on the Bloomington Garden Club Garden Walk in June 2019.

Everything seemed to be on schedule. Then, in April of 2019, an insect infestation destroyed the sod that had been planted the year before. A new batch was hastily bought and laid. By the June Garden Walk, the perennials and shrubs were robust, second-year residents of the garden. Derek had the drainage issues under control, beautiful jets of water arched over the blue swimming pool, and the formal garden pattern of annual plants with subtly contrasting colors was ready to be admired. Visitors could ascend the stairs to the terrace overlooking the back garden and enjoy a mosaic of plants from above. Or they could admire it at ground level by strolling around the pathways. There was so much to see and enjoy that it was hard to believe the garden was only two years old. *