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Cosmic Garden

Thanks to a chance encounter, Barbara Katz is at home—literally—in one of her favorite gardens that she ever designed

By Jane Berger

It was just a routine shopping expedition to the grocery store, but it was truly a life-transforming experience for landscape designer Barbara Katz, owner of London Landscapes, Inc. of Bethesda, Maryland.

Katz ran into a former client in the Giant—not just any client, but the owner of the most spectacular garden she had ever designed. Katz was told that the owner would soon be selling the house to move to Massachusetts. Though Katz and her husband were on the verge of starting a major renovation on their own house, she knew even that “wasn’t going to be the house of my dreams,” she said.



As Katz stood in the grocery store that day, “All of a sudden I had this epiphany,” she said. “What if we could buy that house? It would answer all of the issues and it would give me my little baby on a silver platter.”

The garden in question, located in Glen Echo

Landscape Design: Barbara Katz, London Landscapes, Inc., Bethesda, Maryland

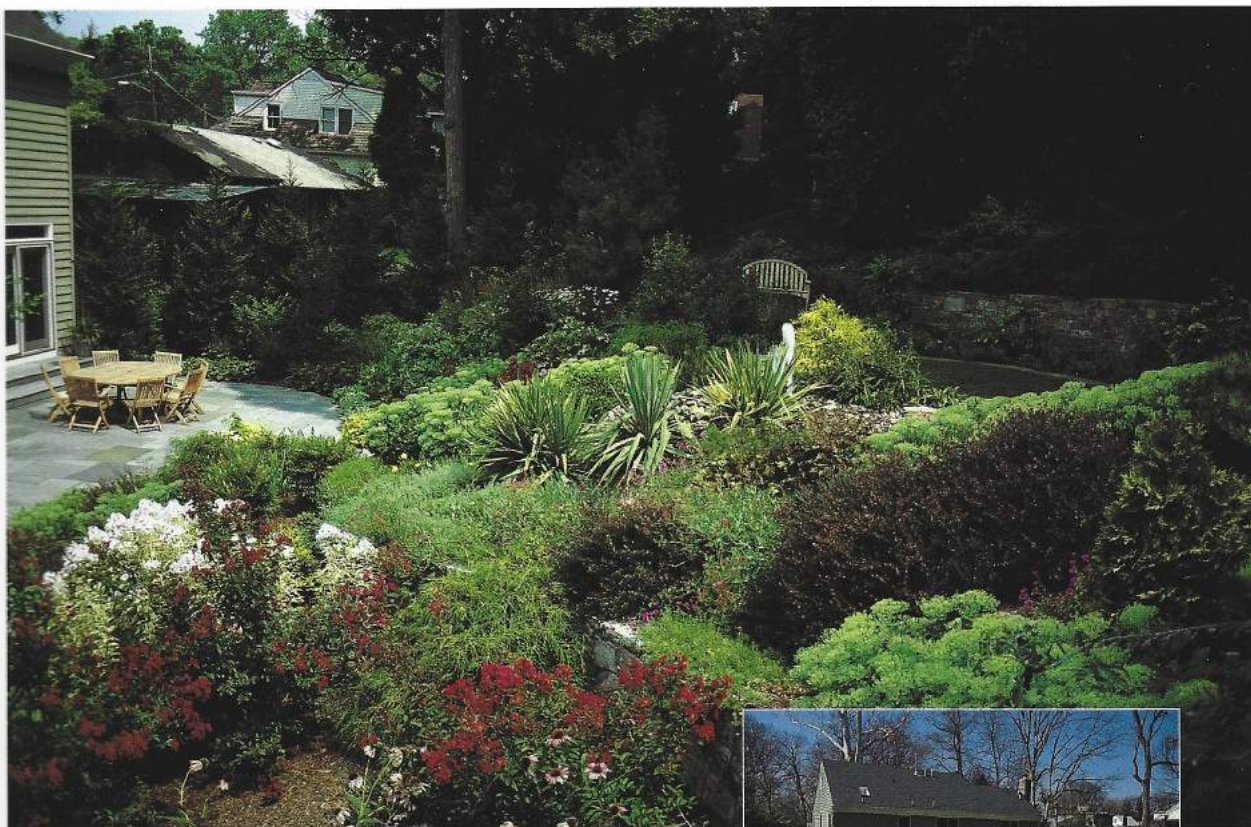


Landscape designer Barbara Katz (above) transported K.K., a thriving caterpillar topiary, to her family’s new home.

Heights, is noticeable from the moment you approach by car or on foot. An airy honey locust sits at the center of a lovely circle of grass, surrounded by a wide and inviting circular bluestone path and garden beds overflowing with dense plantings of shrubs and perennials.

When Katz first met her clients in 1995, they wanted a design that would work with their yard, which has a 10- to 12-foot slope dropping from the back of the lot to the back of the house. They also wanted a spacious patio, plantings that would give it the feeling of a French country garden and no trees or grass.

“I had to convince them that trees make a garden,” said Katz, “and that without any grass at all, there would be too much plant material and not enough resting space.” She and her clients went through several different design options before they eventually reached a compromise. “I’m very committed to exploring a number of radically different design options for any project,” explained Katz. “I think it’s really critical to go through that with the homeowner.



Little did the designer know when she transformed her clients' lackluster yard (inset, right) into a dream garden (above), that the property would one day be her own. She now uses the garden as a personal testing ground where she nurtures favorite plants like the daylily "Eric Murray" (opposite, bottom) and Stokes aster "Klaus Jelitto" (below).



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You might take them places they wouldn't have gone before. And if they have very specific feelings about what moves them, I feel it's my job to listen to them."

The clients finally settled upon the option that was also the designer's favorite. According to Katz, since a circular theme was already in place for the front of the



property, it made sense to carry it through to the back. The multi-level garden now has a roomy patio at the rear of the house, wide steps leading up to a circular lawn on the second level, a gazebo on level three and a mulched path with a hammock on level four. A

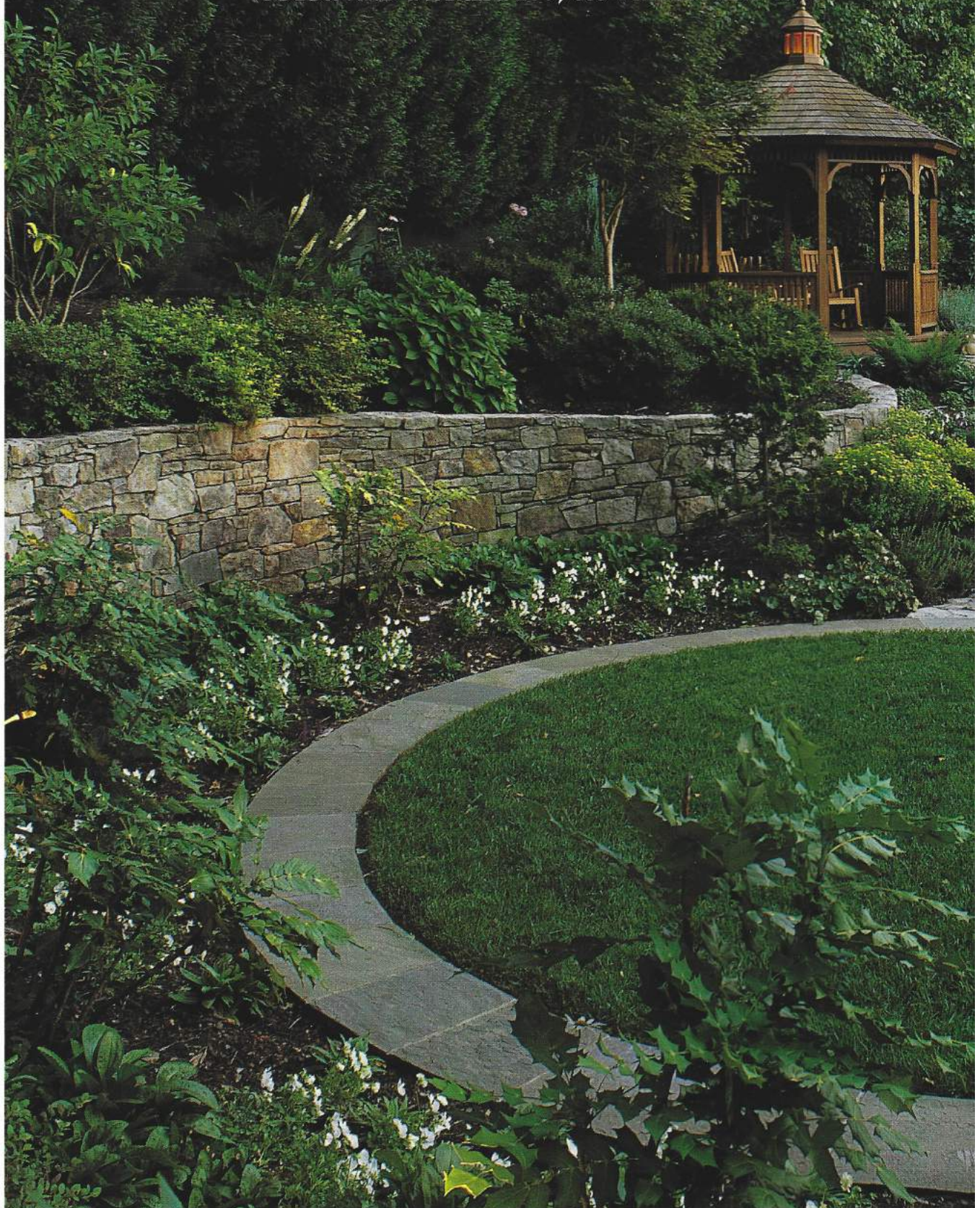
delicate, circular water feature is visible from the gazebo above and from the patio and house below.

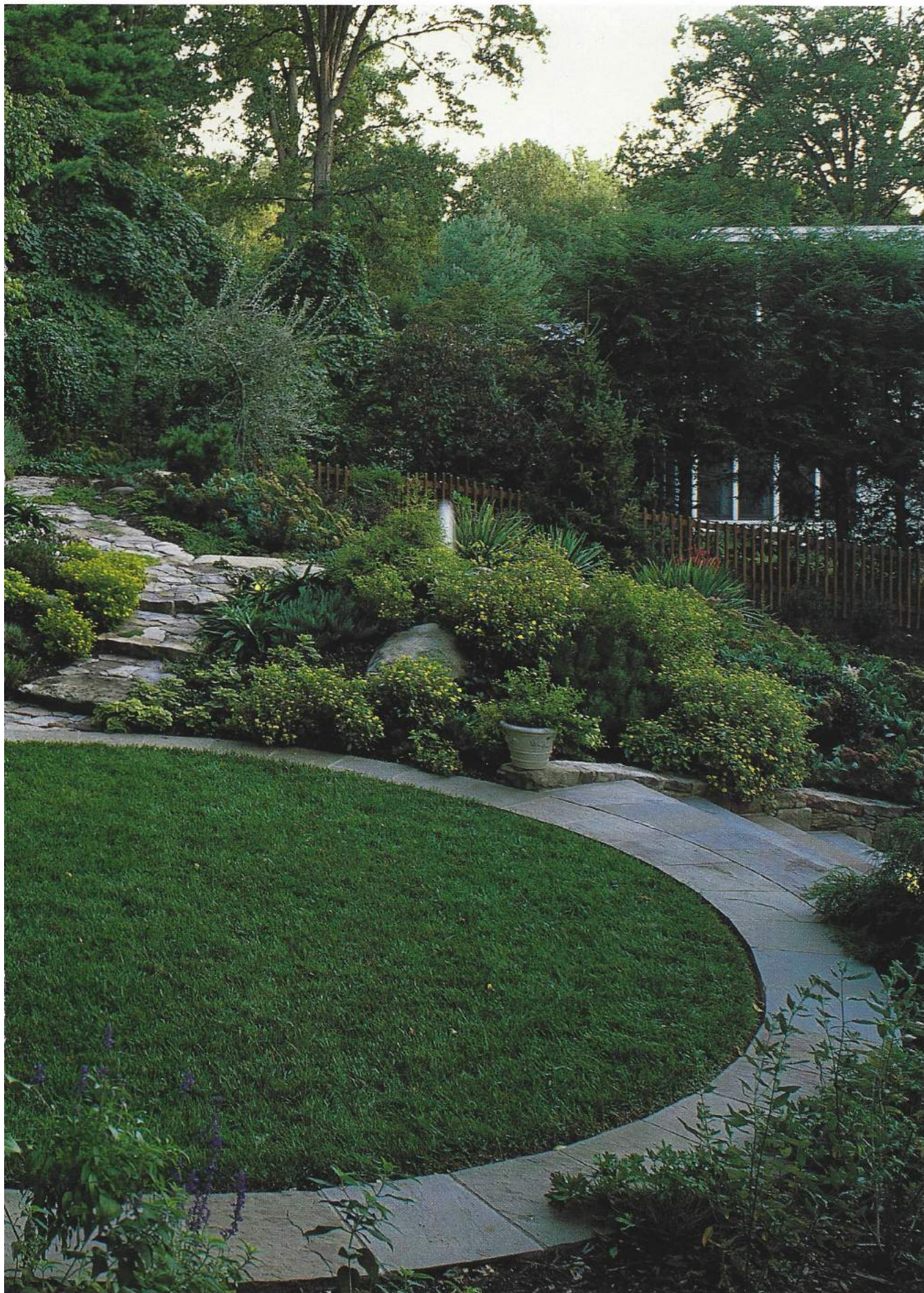
Katz envisioned plants "tumbling down the hillside in a certain configuration and dropping over the wall, a motif of water and color flowing through the garden in ribbons." Glass doors and windows stretch across the entire rear side of the house, making the multitude of plants visible from every angle.

At the beginning of the project, the client produced six pages of plant material that she wanted in the garden, and she and Katz went through them one by one. Once they determined what would work in this region and what would not, "we had an incredible selection of plants," said Katz. On one side of the house, she put in a "test garden" where the clients could try out new plants and grow herbs and vegetables. "At the time, she wasn't a great gardener," said Katz, "but she turned into an incredible one, and that's the great thing about being in this business. If you can end up inspiring the homeowner, it qualitatively changes their life."

The qualitative change in Katz's life came when her former clients agreed to sell her the house in 2002. When the clients came down a little on the price, Katz and her husband went up a little and the deal was done.

**"THERE IS NOT A DAY THAT GOES BY," SAID KATZ,
"THAT WE DON'T THANK OUR LUCKY STARS. I CAN COME OUT HERE
AND THINK ABOUT PLANT COMBINATIONS AND LIGHT AND
COLOR AND INTEREST 24-7, 365 DAYS OF THE YEAR."**







In place of the “test garden,” Katz has installed her own plant nursery. She now collects plants and has a place to try out unique specimens when she stumbles across them. She’s had to remove some plants from the garden to make space for new ones, but that’s the way she works. “The garden itself is where I try things out,” she said. “It really is my lab. I’ll pull things from the nursery and plant them somewhere in the garden and assess a combination, and I can be as neurotic as I want. What’s fantastic is that I can bring customers here and show them some of the latest plants available on the market, and they can see them in the ground and well established.”



Katz is an aficionado of variegated plants, and there are many in her backyard garden, from the white-variegated Chinese dogwood “Wolf Eyes” to the false holly “Goshiki,” the garden phlox “Nora Leigh”

A circular lawn surrounded by leatherleaf mahonia and white impatiens leads up to the gazebo (previous spread). Abundant plant life spills over the wall leading to the patio, including bagatelle barberry, junipers, yuccas, sedum and catmint (above). Fragrant hosta “August Lily” (below) is planted in a circle around the gazebo (opposite).

and the juniper “Motherlode” with gold tips at the ends of its branches.

You’ll see plants in Katz’s garden that you’re unlikely to see in many other city or suburban landscapes. They include a weeping silver-leaf pear that she first fell in love with when she lived in England; a fall-blooming aster that forms a white mat on the ground and flowers for weeks; a dwarf crape myrtle and a dwarf mugo pine; and many different hydrangeas.

One of Katz’s favorite stages in the garden comes in early summer when her Stoke’s aster “Klaus Jellitto” begins to bloom. With huge powder-blue flowers, “it’s never stopped performing in all these years,” she says. “It flowers like this for four to five weeks, and sporadically for the rest of the season.”

Another favorite is the fragrant hosta “August Lily,” which has glossy light green leaves and clusters of extremely fragrant trumpet-shaped white flowers. Katz planted it in a circle around the gazebo for special effect. “There’s this moment in the fall with the big, lush green leaves, these spectacular pure white flowers with hints of purple, and this fragrance. When you sit up there, it’s just like being in paradise,” she said.



A final addition to the garden was K.K. the topiary. When they first arrived in the DC area, Barbara's husband, Howard, an architect and builder, planted four baby boxwoods outside of their original home. Its purpose was to divide Barbara's garden from the children's play area. When the boxwoods began to grow into a hedge, Howard slowly began to shape and craft it, and soon, said Katz, "it was developing antennas and a tail and, wow—it turned into a caterpillar."

Though they left K.K. behind when they moved, they later heard that K.K. was directly in the path of a new addition to be put onto their old house. So they made arrangements to transport the topiary. Katz's landscape crew hand-dug the boxwoods, each of which had a root ball weighing approximately 500 pounds. "It was a labor of love," said Katz. Now thriving in his new home, K.K. has become a neighborhood icon. "Every day neighbors with kids stop and talk to him," she said.

Katz still appreciates the fact that the good working relationship she established with her original clients allowed her to follow her creative visions for a very special landscape. "It's really been kind of a cosmic experience," she said, "because they were so good to me—they just said 'Follow your vision.' And when someone gives you that kind of trust, you put your heart and soul into it."

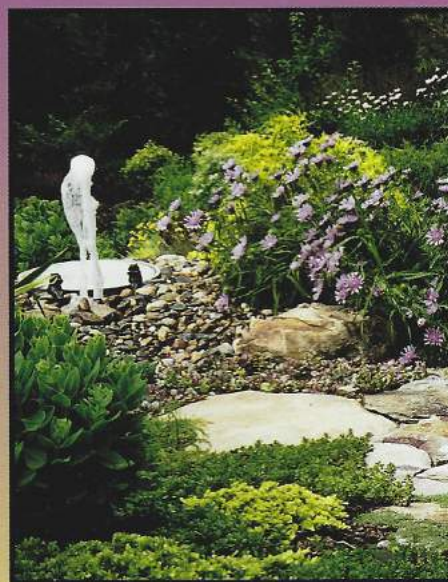
Just looking at all the plants through the home's rear expanse of glass is nothing short of a landscape designer's dream. "There is not a day that goes by," said Katz, "that we don't thank our lucky stars. It's been like a new lease on life. I can come out here and think about plant combinations and light and color and interest 24-7, 365 days of the year." ♦

A freelance writer and landscape designer, Jane Berger is a partner in the Garden Design Group, LLC, based in Alexandria, Virginia.

London Landscapes specializes in creating extraordinary award-winning gardens for the discerning homeowner. They collaborate closely throughout the design process to craft highly-personalized landscapes; elegant stonework and dramatic water features are the backdrop for stunning, unusual plantings, which form a rich tapestry of color, texture and fragrance throughout the year.



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