

In New York's Catskill Mountains, an English garden with deep roots and its architecture intact is nudged toward simplicity with native plants and shrubs.

THE 1893 SHINGLE STYLE HOUSE, nicely renovated and expanded, was lovely—but Larry McCaffrey bought Wildmuir for its gardens. Even without the perennials that had waned during a series of short-term owners, the 3¼-acre landscape revealed its brilliant design and hardscape.

The house at Wildmuir was built by Candace Wheeler, co-founder of the Onteora Club, a 1300-acre preserve in the Catskills, which was conceived as a mountain getaway for urban artists and literati. “Onteora” comes from a Native American word meaning “hills of the sky.” If Wheeler’s name rings a bell, it’s because she was a founder of the Society of Decorative Arts in New York City, and partner with Louis Comfort Tiffany in the renowned interior design firm. An early feminist who championed paid work for women, Wheeler designed textiles, wallpapers, and interiors.

Taming Wildmuir

By Tovah Martin / Photos by Mick Hales

TOVAH: Please ID buildings. I.D. round sculpture on a pedestal. A new hydrangea hedge capped with conical hemlocks (*Tsuga canadensis*) echoes the house's latticework and window mullions.







The garden today is in sympathy with the mountain surroundings, with the Arts & Crafts ideals evident in Caparn's original design, and with this owner's lifestyle.

The cottage as Wheeler built it was about 60% of its current size. The property changed hands several times until in 1920 it was purchased by Mrs. Ben Ali Haggin. She hired one of the most prominent landscape architects of the time, Harold A. Caparn. Born in England and educated at Columbia and in Paris, Caparn was landscape architect to the New York Zoological Park and consulting landscape architect to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. At a time when formal gardens reigned, Caparn taught informal design at Columbia; his favorite causes included the preservation of state and national parks.

The walled "cloister garden" Caparn installed was a British-influenced affair tucked within a maze of stone walls. The climax was a double perennial border, with a stone niche as focal point, enhanced by a secluded and vine-embraced pergola along one side. Affording a romantic, heady opportunity for strolling, the walled garden was designed for viewing from the house above. To this day it has a bygone drama. Actually, the owner's son—James Ben Ali Haggin III, known as Ben Ali Haggin—elevated its allure. A renowned portrait artist, he also excelled in stage set design and held legendary costume parties in the garden.

FOR NEARLY 20 YEARS, Larry McCaffrey struggled with perennials in the lower terrace. He had initially refilled that garden with ingredients typical of an early 20th-century English perennial border: delphiniums, phlox, columbines, geraniums, and so on. Although its hardscape was brilliantly conceived, the garden





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The view of the garden from the upper terrace is spectacular. TOVAH: Is the fireplace made of local bluestone?

A lattice gate under the WHAT entry leads to WHAT; has green always been the trim color? Bottom right; groundcover names and also call attention to the scupper or gutter for drainage. Left, what part of the house are we looking at (rear, side, its compass orientation?) The patio is new, designed by Purinton, correct? eb il maio inia volorep ratemquibus endebitibus, tem vomet dolorep ernat. Ulpa non consenda vendus et, ium et doluptat asped est, soluptati delitiuscit bus endebitibus, tem vomet dolorep ernat. Ulpa non consenda vendus delitiuscit autas sam, omnimet est expe nis sum.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The romantic stone pergola that defines one side of the garden is original to the 1920s redesign by Harold Caparn. TOVAH: Is it in good shape? What is growing on the top of the rafters? What's with the nose sculpture? I.D. bench if important. Em vomet dolorep ernat.



had labor-intensive plantings that had changed over time. Gardens are forever growing; original trees had either produced more shade or succumbed in storms. Also, delphiniums and other British perennials tend to be short-lived, especially in the Catskills' plant hardiness Zone 4. Larry couldn't keep ahead of the labor that had once engaged four full-time gardeners.

At the same time, McCaffrey's understanding of garden ecosystems was evolving. A well-traveled and astute gardener, inspired by international trends, he discovered his fondness for shrubs and their pruning. In 2009, McCaffrey contacted landscape architect Jamie Purinton, whose Hudson Valley-based practice focuses on sustainable design. She would design new plantings for the lower terrace, an upper terrace fireplace patio near an herb garden, and new entry steps to provide access between the kitchen and dining area. Native species got preference.

Labor-intensive perennials have been replaced by a squared dwarf river birch (*Betula nigra* 'Little King'), also known as Fox Valley birch, and summer sweet (*Clethra alnifolia*). Plantings flow and rise around the multi-level foundation. McCaffrey staged an ode to pruning with a sheared boxwood and hosta garden softened by a wall of climbing hydrangea in the rear courtyard. Further afield, heather and native ferns beckon.