

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

National Country Garden

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1df9v6jk>

Journal

Places, 3(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

Authors

Thayer, Kyle

Lyndon, Donlyn

Publication Date

1986-12-01

Peer reviewed

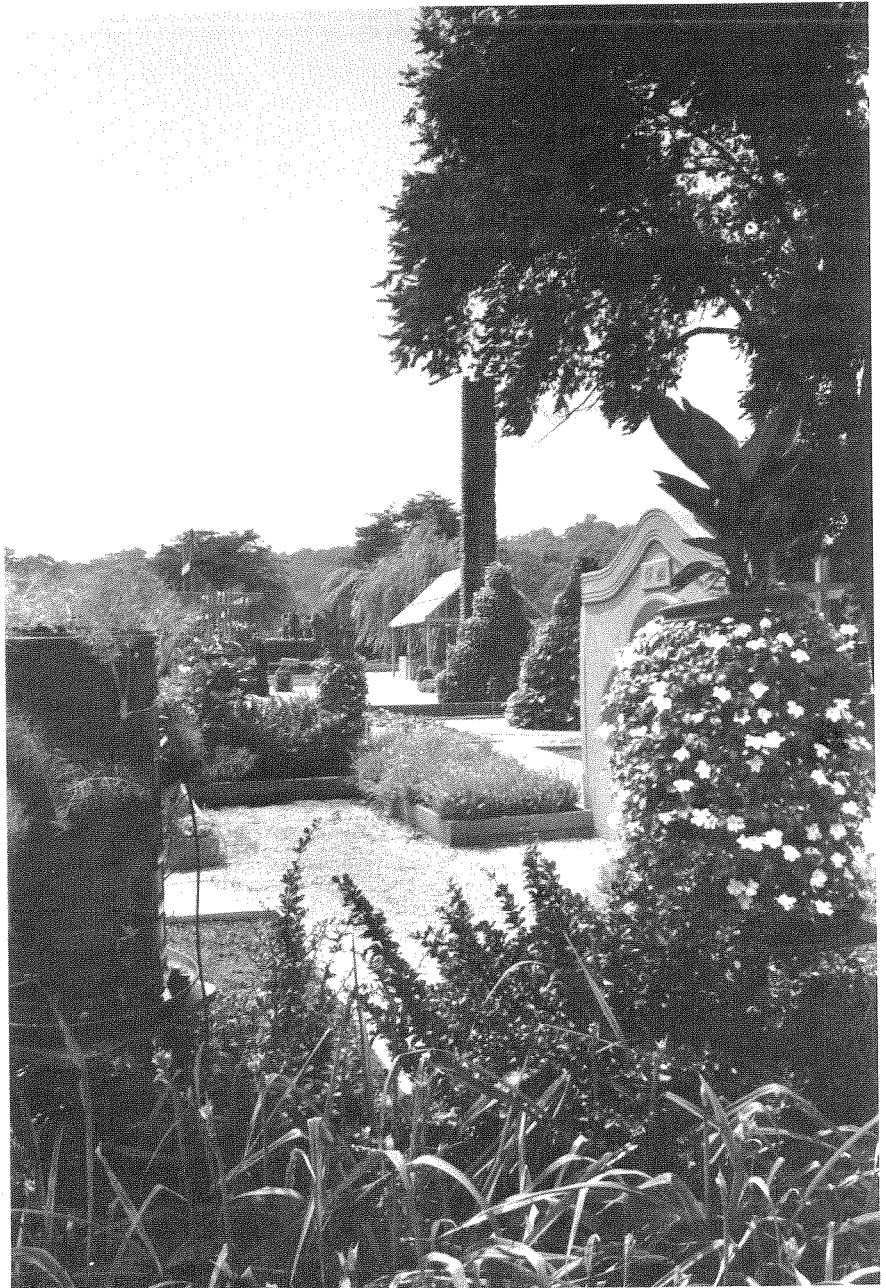
National Country Garden

Compiled by Kyle Thayer
and Donlyn Lyndon

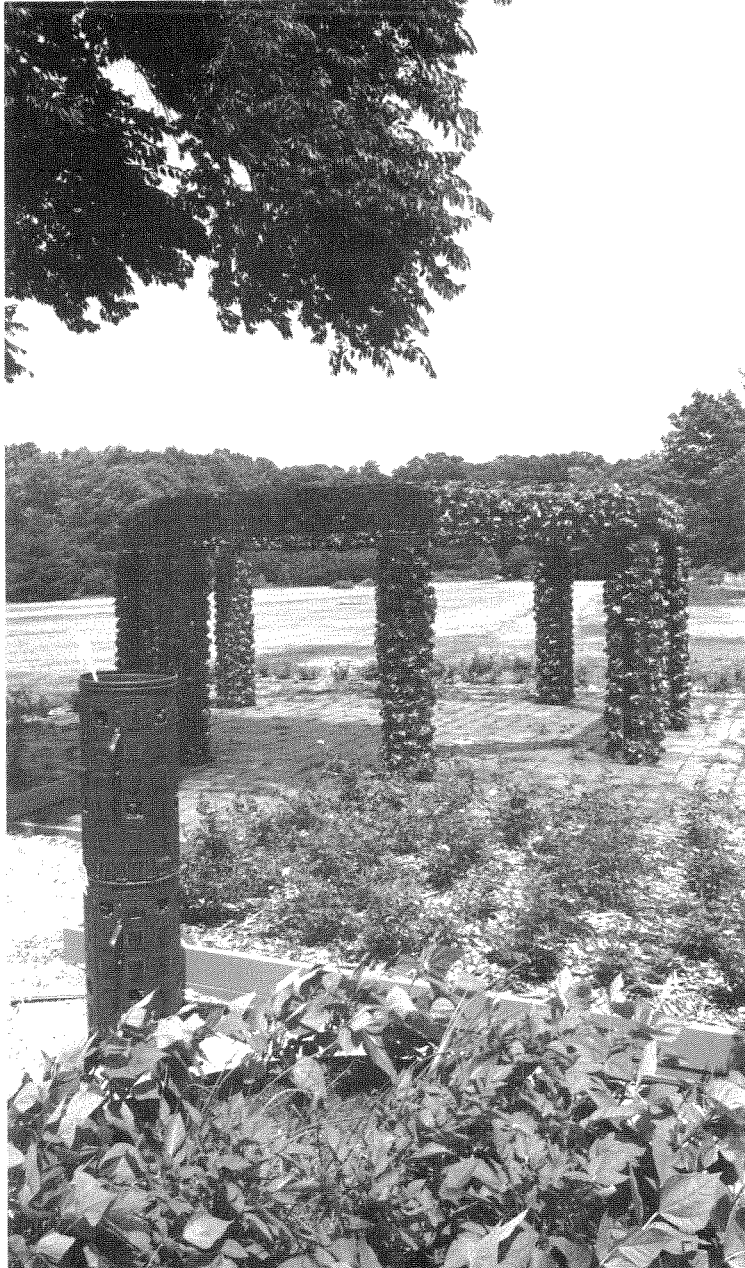
Red begonias, dusty miller, and summer madness tower thirty feet in the air to mark the opening of the National Country Garden's third season. Established in 1984 on a three-acre site at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., the educational public garden demonstrates innovative design solutions for intensive urban food and flower gardening. Originally constructed as a temporary exhibit, public response has been so enthusiastic that the garden has become an ongoing attraction. Brightly colored floral walls, purple paint, and colorful banners create a circuslike atmosphere that seeks to engage as well as to educate. Director Henry M. Cathey emphasizes that gardening should be a rewarding activity for anyone, regardless of circumstances; therefore, the various rooms of the garden are suggestive of qualities (and resources) that would be pertinent to various user groups.

Tommy Thompson of *Gardens for All* magazine of Burlington, Vermont, had an idea for a demonstration home garden that would be located at the National Arboretum. Director Henry M. Cathey, a dynamic and flamboyant spokesman for gardening, acted on the plan. Cathey called on Guy Rando, landscape architect from Reston, Virginia, to assist in the development of the concepts and design of the garden.

Rando created a series of over thirteen rooms that demonstrate the variety of rich results that can



I The National Country Garden
Photographs by Donlyn Lyndon

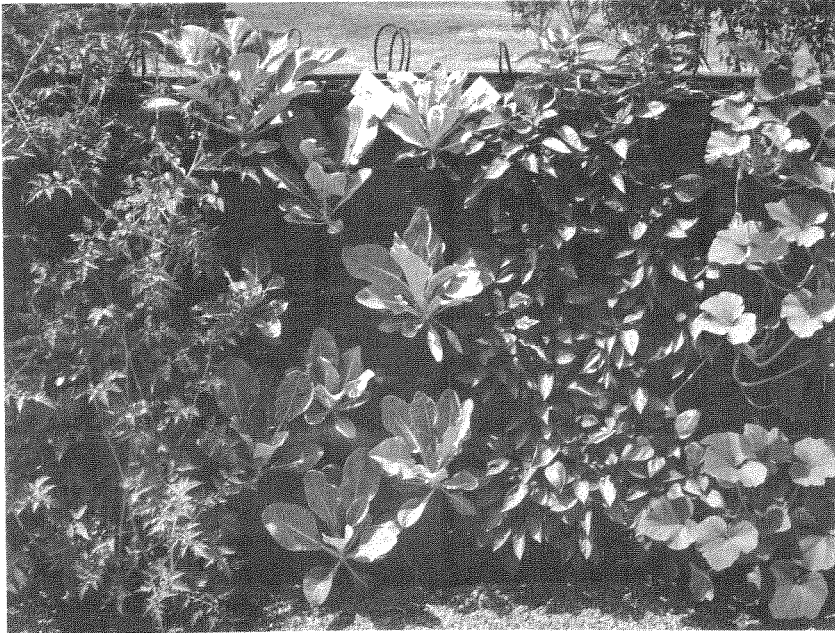


2

be achieved using simple means. A clothesline garden, various town house gardens, gardens that yield from \$50 to \$400 worth of produce, a third-world garden, and a garden for the physically impaired are laid out along an informal garden path. The sequence of spaces is defined by partitions, walls, and even a gazebo made from the Living Wall container system.

In truth, the framework for the garden contributes as much to the qualities it portrays as do the plants. A spectacular tower of flowering plants, strange mini-ziggaraunts, structured walls, and rows of plant columns are all constructed with the Living Wall container system. In its ingenuity, the system tends to upstage the humble acts of gardening. There are, however, some wonderfully lighthearted moments: an orchard of stacked containers grown green around their surfaces and capped by corn stalks, a perfectly beautiful stick-framed false front to signify a town house while making a very amiable limit to the garden space, a ring of plant columns standing in druidic splendor, and an assortment of gates and trellises that give structure overhead.

Originally developed for food production in third-world countries, the Living Wall Garden is a soilless container growing system that makes vertical gardening possible. The modular, stackable system is also well-suited for ornamental plants. A native of Brooklyn, Rando knows that urban dwellers may not have the room or the soil for



3



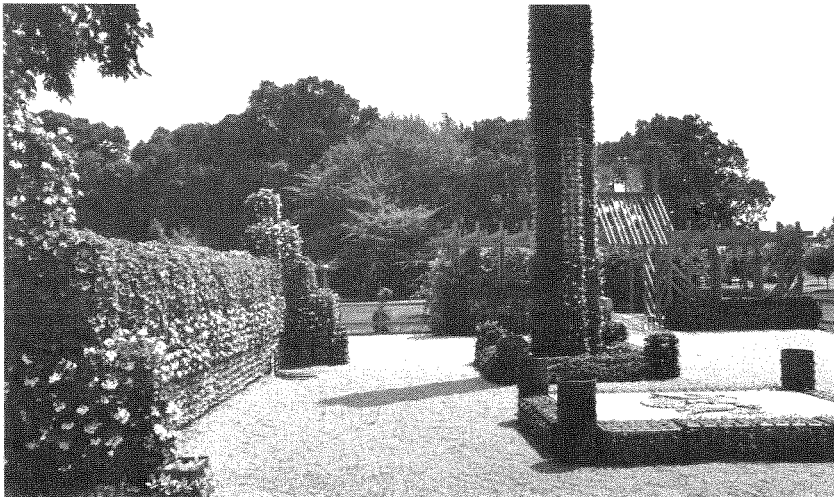
4

3 **Vegetables** in the Living Wall

4 **Orchard** of Vegetables



5



6

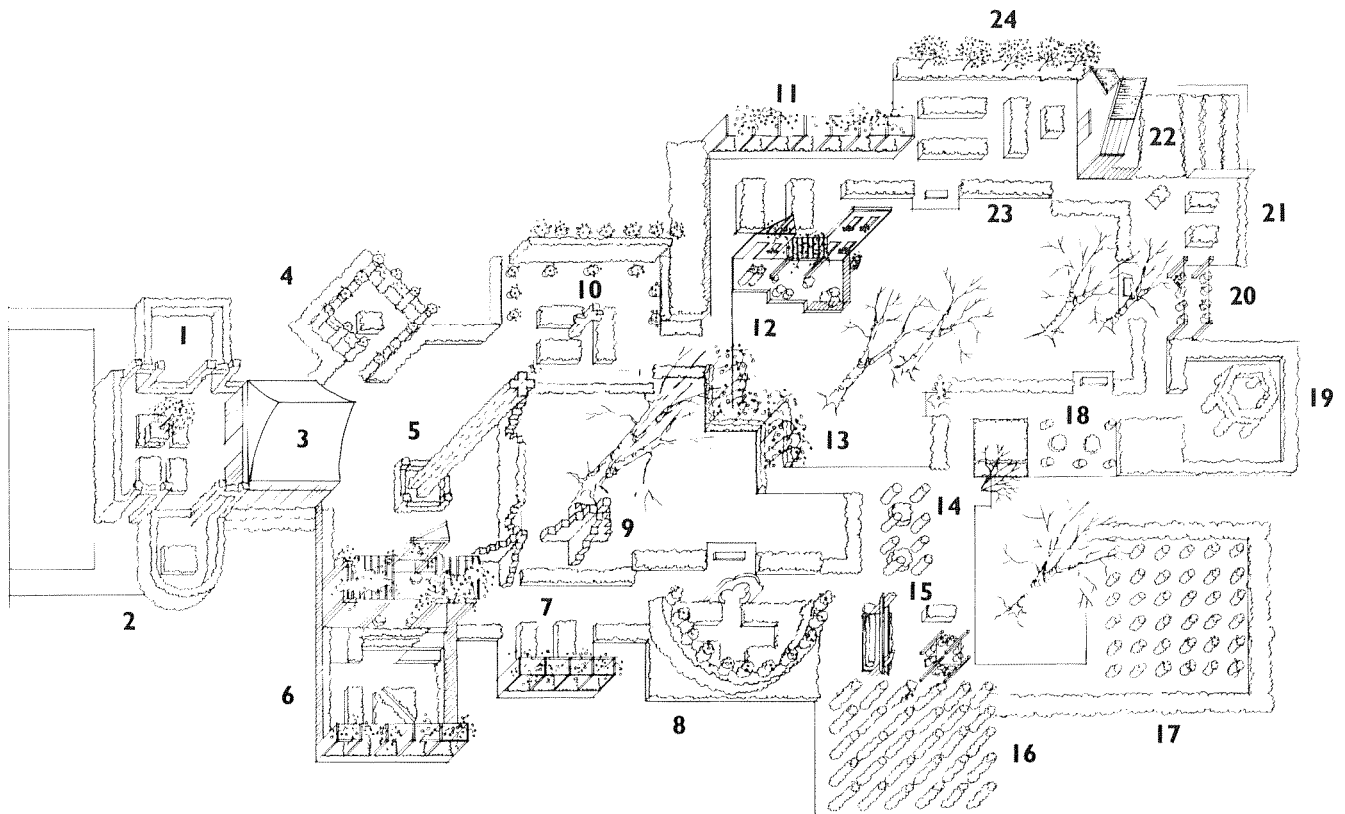
5 **Townhouse** With Windows

6 **Geometry** in the Garden

traditional gardening. The National Country Garden demonstrates how window sills, fences, balconies, or the sides of buildings can be turned into productive gardening spaces by using container growing systems.

The system of perforated plastic modular containers, filled with Rockwool or a mixture of silica and vermiculite, frees the gardener from the constraints of local soil conditions. The resulting vertical garden, while highly flexible and adaptable to a variety of conditions, is very literally not rooted in the place. The garden can even be moved to a new location. The system is expensive: \$24 buys a container large enough for thirteen plants, while an eighty-plant holder runs about \$90. The cost factor makes one doubt whether the system would find wide use among lower income gardeners, although it is pointed out that discarded commercial plastic milk crates, filled with peat moss and stacked, will do just as well.

Many of the features of the garden were constructed with volunteer labor using donated and found materials. "We have kept the design of these gardens simple," explains Rando. "Any of them can be built with cast-off materials and ordinary household tools." Old tires become raised planting beds. Lengths of discarded wood are crisscrossed into an attractive trellis covered with beans. A reflecting pool is fashioned from sand and large sheets of plastic. The collection of different materials are unified by coats of eye-popping, lilac-colored



paint. "Purple holds its own against any color," says Cathey. "It is an ideal color for the garden." It certainly contributes to the circus-like atmosphere, a comparison Cathey does nothing to discourage.

If gardening is elevated to pure spectacle, as it is in the National Country Garden, then it is because Cathey's missionary zeal demands that the word reach a large public. The word is that gardening is fun, healthy, and profitable.

It is worth noting, however, that much of the power of the place is rooted in the contrast between these close, clever little garden patches and the sweeping lawns and mature trees of the arboretum. Some of the latter have been skillfully incorporated in the layout of the

garden, and some mature trees may be available in urban settings. But the ennobling contrast of distance is less likely to be available to most of the public when they go home. Subtle arrangement, contrasts, and allusions will be needed to make a stack of flower-decked containers seem to be nearly as much fun when lodged in a conventional backyard.

National Country Garden, Axiometric view
(drawing courtesy of Guy L. Rondo and Associates)

1. Harvest displays
2. Ancient plants
3. Information tent
4. Herbs
5. Flower tower
6. Townhouse
7. \$100 yield garden
8. Exotics
9. Living wall ziggurat
10. Rose garden
11. \$200 yield garden
12. Apartment balcony gardens
13. Morning glory archway
14. Living wall vegetable garden
15. Handicap garden
16. Garden for the Third World
17. Garden for the Third World
18. Root crops
19. Living wall gazebo
20. Clothesline garden
21. Salad garden
22. Sunflowers
23. \$400 yield garden
24. Dwarf fruit tree orchard