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 circus-like 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 in 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
be achieved using simple means. A clothesline garden, various
town house gardens, gardens that
eyield 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 trade 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-
ziggurats,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
light-hearted 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
amiably limit to the garden space,
a ring of plant columns standing in
dramatic 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
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 at 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 Cather. “It is an ideal color for the garden.” It certainly contributes to the circus-like atmosphere, a comparison Cathay does nothing to discourage.

If gardening is elevated to pure spectacle, as it is in the National Country Garden, then it is because Cathay’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, Axonometric 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 yard garden
8. Exotics
9. Living wall ziggurat
10. Rose garden
11. $200 yard 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 gazebos
20. Clothesline garden
21. Salad garden
22. Sunflowers
23. $400 yard garden
24. Dwarf fruit tree orchard