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Q & A

Getting real simple with an editor in the know

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DECORATING AND GARDENING



IRENE VIRAG

An enclave of flowers by the sea

If we're serious about our gardens — and perhaps even it we're not — they are reflections of our lives, of how we live and who we are. It is that way with Ted Kaplan and Henry Tobin, who have been together for the past 20 years and are alike in values but different in temperament. Each tends his own garden in a house by the sea.

This is in Northport where Ted, an attorney, and Henry, an antiques dealer, live in a 150-year-old house that backs onto the harbor with its constantly changing view of life on the water. The property is only one-sixth of an acre, but what Ted and Henry have done with it is amazing. "Henry's garden is in the front yard," Ted says. "Mine is in the backyard. And never the twain shall touch."

Which is true in a physical sense but not in spirit. Henry raises mini-hostas and like him, his garden is serene and self-contained, a shady green oasis that offers visitors an immediate air of sophistication and good taste. Ted's garden is colorful and generous and pleasantly boisterous with pots and plantings that range from black-eyed Susans to banana trees.

To me, the two gardens in the house by the sea complement each other just as their owners do.

As gardeners go, Henry is a late bloomer compared with Ted, who has been cultivating the site during the 32 years he's lived in the house. But his renovation of the front yard indicates that he's a fast learner. The yard offers the challenge of a 15-foot slope, which

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Ted Kaplan, seated, and Henry Tobin on the dock of their garden by the bay



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COVER STORY

Gardens by the sea

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is probably why the previous owner confined the plantings to pachysandra.

"It was all pachysandra all the time," Henry says. He saw other possibilities in the treed slope where azaleas and laurels and *Amelanchier canadensis* reign in spring, and where sweet woodruff whorls its way among the plantings. He saw rivers of hostas and banks of ferns and a Chinese garden pond. And so, about five years ago, when a tree came down and created a bare spot, he started ripping out the pachysandra and bringing his vision to life.

To me, as we walk about the front yard on a rainy Sunday, Henry's vision has an almost Zen-like quality that's enhanced by the small rectangular pond near the front door. A Chinese bell sits over the pond and a frog with a bright green face, who could easily be Kermit, lives in the clear water. The bell is a venerable substitute for the pavilions that often stand over ponds in China.

The garden runs downhill, and Henry took advantage of the slope. "I started playing with the lines of the plants, creating two streams of hostas," he explains. One green and white, the other yellow and green. They flow down the slope from different corners and cross midway. Light green Seafoam and chartreuse-streaked Guacamole, blue-green Frances Williams and heart-shaped Sum and Substance, vase-shaped Krossa Regal and rippled creamy-edged Regal Splendor.

"I planted coral bells — *Heuchera* — along one stream for purple and red contrast," Henry says. "Along the other stream are larger plants — liriope, geraniums — that spread out and descend in size to a pool of miniature and dwarf plants."

At the foot of the slope, mini hostas look like a ground cover — charmers like Feather Boa, a medium light green hosta that grows only 4 to 6 inches tall and spreads in clumps. In the deepest shade, hellebores wait for their turn to show off again in the early days of next spring. So do hundreds of bulbs. And ferns — Henry is especially lucky with maiden hair ferns — add texture and softness with their delicate feathery fronds.

"It's constant tinkering," Henry says of his garden. "It's a work in progress."

Then it's Ted's turn. The rain stops, and I go from Zen to a Broadway show. As Ted puts it, "My garden is all about color."

And a good deal more. He started the back garden years

ago with a couple of big pots of sea grass on the deck. Flowers quickly took over. Now there's just one container of sea grass almost lost among the massive groupings of cannas and dahlias and elephant ears. Ted's vision is pink lilies and blue hydrangeas and yellow black-eyed Susans, with a white hibiscus here and there. There's even room for tomatoes. Oh yes, and a pear tree.

The property continues its slope toward the harbor and the garden follows the topography in a five-level terraced design. Ted replaced the previous owner's makeshift walls of 2-by-6 planks with railroad ties, pulling out hedges and starting flower beds. And midway down the steep stairway, there's an arbor-like structure resembling gazebos Ted saw along the River Tigris during a trip to South America.

As he leads the way down the hillside, it's obvious that he's maximized every inch of his land. And nature has helped. Phlox and black-eyed Susans and *Verbena bonariensis* reseed themselves, popping up here, there and everywhere. The phlox shows up in shades

of pink ranging from pale pastel to salmon and from purple to magenta. "I'm always digging up phlox," Ted says. "Do you want some?"

It's a typical sentence for Ted, whose garden is a testament to his philosophy of friends helping friends. At least three times, he's divided a banana tree he lovingly brings into the greenhouse he built from a kit when the weather cools, sharing the plantings with friends and neighbors. Same with the towering red cannas he got last year from his longtime friend, floral designer J. Barry Ferguson, who used them in the Rockefeller Center vest pocket park on 51st Street in Manhattan. Pots of them now decorate his own dock as well as the adjacent docks of his neighbors.

Even the arugula — started from seeds that Henry brought back from Italy six years ago — is a perennial self-starter. Because of the dampness and the microclimate created by the water, Ted says, everything reseeds. "I like to let things go and see what happens. I figure live and let live."



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His laissez-faire attitude doesn't extend to his Rose of Sharon, however. When he was in the Loire Valley, he saw Rose of Sharon standards that had been limbed up and pruned so that the single central stem grew as thick as tree trunks. He was struck by the dramatic structure and is trying to replicate the look with his own hardy hibiscus.

I'm impressed by the richness of the soil and Ted points to a work area where he screens the dark humus that gardeners call brown gold. "Everything on this property is composted," Ted tells me. "Even the pots. They're 50 percent compost."

I should also mention the greenhouse, which is attached to the back of the house. That's where Ted nurtures *Cymbidium* orchids and where he forces about 200 hyacinths and other bulbs for winter bloom indoors. When the tropical plants on the deck come in for the winter, the greenhouse is a veritable jungle.

And of course there's the show-stopping view of the harbor from anywhere in the



backyard. Northport Harbor is a magnificent backdrop to the garden as you descend the stairway, pausing at the gazebo, standing at the dock. The sky, the boats bobbing in the bay, the sailboats tacking in the distance.

But even at the water's edge, Ted has cleverly kept the garden front and center. The harbor view is punctuated by containers spilling over with pink and terra cotta-colored Million Bells petunias and



purple Torenia and yellow sedum, with flowering fennel mixed in among the bold red and orange cannas and the giant golden dahlias. With masses of coleus and fuchsias and Peruvian lilies and Montauk daisies and with miniature coral-colored gladiolias that are like an elegant arrangement in pots by themselves.

"I'm always moving pots around — it's like a movable feast," says the lawyer who as a child gardened on a quar-

ter-acre in Riverdale with his mother and grandmother and once sent in his own nursery order for 100 rhododendrons and azaleas. "At the end of the season, I bring in all the tropical plants. I store the cannas and gladiolias in bags of peat moss. Every single pot gets emptied and the dirt gets saved in a big garbage can, the pots are cleaned and turned upside down for the winter. By early April, I'm laying the pots out again for another season of planting. I love it."

Which is another key ingredient in the way they've made the most of what Ted calls their "tiny spot."

Ted doesn't enter or leave the house without admiring the various textures and the many shades of green of the ferns and hostas in Henry's garden. "It's wonderful, don't you think?" he says. And Henry enjoys the abundance of blooms and the profusion of color in the terraced backyard that is the focal point of life on the harbor. "Ted's the real gardener," he says.

Their lives are happily joined. And if truth be told, so are their gardens.

Clockwise from above, Henry Tobin in his front yard oasis of hostas and ferns; black-eyed Susans reign in the back; pots of towering red cannas nestle with elephant ears, coleus and dahlias on the dockside garden; miniature gladiolias and ornamental grasses in containers add to what Ted Kaplan calls "a movable feast."