

MIND,  
SOUL,  
DESIGN



**PRACTICALITY RESIDES AT THE CORE OF EVERY VIRGINIA BURT DESIGN.**

BY KATARINA KATSMAN, ASLA

“I want to create gardens that really are truly meaningful and touch people,” says Virginia Burt, FASLA, the founder and principal of Virginia Burt Designs in Burlington, Ontario, Canada, and Cleveland, Ohio. She’d been practicing nine years by the time she was invited to start on a partner track at JSW+ Associates in Richmond Hill, Ontario, but said she was looking for more in her own work. “My personal life was deeper and more meaningful than the kind of work that I was doing, and I said, ‘You know what? I wanted to be more.’”

Burt could have easily gone down a number of paths. She is an avid skier and author, and thought at one point she would go into veterinary medicine. But since high school she had known exactly what she wanted to do. “My brother brought home a woman for Thanksgiving who was in landscape architecture, and I was like, ‘I love drawing. I like being outside. I love nature. Oh, my God, you get paid to do stuff like that?’” She was so sure of her path that during an entrance interview for the landscape architecture program at the University of

Guelph, she remembers fielding the question, “What’s your plan if you’re not accepted?” with an immediate: “There is no plan; I’m getting in.”

Her firm’s portfolio includes residential, commercial, and institutional projects, but her passion lies in the soul of each design, no matter the type. As she sees it, a design should act in both a psychological and emotional capacity to heal what ails us, or spur vivid memories and strong emotional responses. She deals in what she calls “emotional intelligence

**ABOVE**  
Virginia Burt, FASLA, contemplates the subtle shifts in hue and texture in the Gathering Place’s Green Rooms.

RICHARD MANDELKORN



**ABOVE**  
No detail is too small for Burt's holistic approach to design.

work” and how we as humans process information.

It's this attention to psychology and the ways our surroundings affect us that gives her work life. She designs gardens meant for healing, though she is quick to emphasize that any garden is a healing garden. Her expertise has grown as she's taken on more projects, but when she started

working on them in the 1990s, the concept of healing gardens was still relatively obscure. “The healing garden information just wasn't there,” Burt says. “So I started literally working through environmental psychology.” She cites Roger Ulrich, Honorary ASLA; Clare Cooper Marcus, Honorary ASLA; and Julie Moir Messervy as essential references, the last of whom, she stresses, con-

tinues to act as inspiration in her practice.

Yet this is only one facet of her designs. Everything she puts in the ground or builds must work, whether it is repurposed materials or hardy plants. Even when creating planting plans, she tries to use plants that are a few zones hardier than where they are going in. It's a core consideration when working on projects in Canada, especially for her projects in Nova Scotia, where nature is dominant and commanding. The practical nature of her work keeps a design grounded and helps ensure a landscape thrives. “I grew up on a farm,” Burt says. “To me, if something is beautiful, but doesn't work...it's not really great. What's really great is when it's beautiful and it works.” ●



**The Gathering Place, Beachwood, Ohio**

Billed as a facility for cancer patients, survivors, and their loved ones, the Gathering Place is an oasis set against a sterile industrial park outside Cleveland. Burt's involvement started through what she calls "a true Cleveland story." When the facility was in its infancy, Burt was invited to submit a landscape design through a referral who knew her when she worked on the Common Ground master plan, Virginia Burt Designs' first work in the United States (see "Forty Days and Forty Nights," *LAM*, September 2000), which won a 1999 ASLA Analysis & Planning Merit Award. She won the bid to design the Gathering Place and conducted a daylong community input session. Her deadline: In just over a month, she'd have a preliminary plan to present to the board. It wasn't until the night before she had

to leave for the presentation that inspiration finally hit, and within three hours she was "literally shaking and crying" from the entire plan flowing from her onto the page.

The garden is a deceptive third of an acre, yet upon entering you feel as though it could stretch for miles. Eleven rooms demarcate the site in total, creating a mix of intimate and exposed spaces that play on the seven archetypes from Messervy's book, *The Inward Garden*. Each space, whether inspired by the embrace of "the sea," the enclosure of "the harbor," or the isolation of "the island," gives visitors a chance to process alone or come together as a group.

Some rooms are quiet and tranquil, with delicate Japanese maples and shade-loving hostas and ferns. Oth-



ers encourage interaction and play. Toward the back of the garden, the topography slopes upward where the story of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly unfolds along a winding path to the top to reveal a sculptural xylophone butterfly. Every now and then you'll hear instruments played in the garden, says Eileen Saffran, the founder and chief executive officer, who says playing music and being in the space has the capacity to "bring people together, as well as to have just peace and calm." •

RICHARD MANDELKORN



**PLAN**

- 1 THE PORTICO
- 2 THE GATHERING TERRACE
- 3 ENTRY & WALK OF FRIENDS
- 4 WALK OF FRIENDS
- 5 THE EDIBLE GARDEN
- 6 THE CHILDREN'S GARDEN
- 7 THE PAVILION
- 8 THE STORYBOOK MAZE
- 9 THE SACRED MOUNT
- 10 THE SECRET MYSTERY GARDEN
- 11 THE GREEN ROOMS
- 12 THE POOL OF GRASS

**RIGHT**  
A mother plays with her children in the Children's Garden, where a custom drum sends vibrations through the platform below.

**OPPOSITE, LEFT**  
The Storybook Maze navigates a site incline up to the Sacred Mount, where visitors are rewarded with views of the entire site.

**OPPOSITE, RIGHT**  
The Portico acts as a partially enclosed, protected space suitable for large gatherings.



## BIG AND SMALLS

Working within an area that spans from USDA zone 6 in Ohio to zone 3 in parts of Canada can be tricky. What Burt might favor for Cleveland might not fare as well in Nova Scotia, meaning her palette often changes depending on the design location. She emphasizes the importance of staying local in materials and plants, and tends to favor palettes that are hardy enough to last.



**1 AESCULUS PARVIFLORA**  
(BOTTLEBRUSH BUCKEYE)

Native to the eastern part of the United States, the bottlebrush buckeye can grow to 16 feet in height with a spread of 15 feet at maturity. Its large, showy white flowers attract butterflies during the months of June and July when it blooms. It is hardy to zone 4.



**2 ARCTOSTAPHYLOS UVA-URSI**  
(KINNIKINNICK)

This North American native grows to six inches high at maturity and has a spreading habit. Its evergreen foliage is complimented by red berries that persist into early winter, with tiny, bell-shaped pink flowers gracing its branches in spring.



**CALAMAGROSTIS X ACUTIFLORA**  
'KARL FOERSTER' (KARL FOERSTER FEATHER REED GRASS)

This dependable cultivar can grow to five feet in height with a compact, upward habit. The green stems winterize to a nice golden hue, making it an ideal backdrop for winter plantings. It also does well in moist, clay-heavy soils.



**CAREX PENNSYLVANICA**  
(PENNSYLVANIA SEDGE)

A useful ground cover for heavily shaded areas, this woodland sedge has a soft, billowing habit that reaches six to 12 inches. It is native to the eastern part of North America and prefers dry soils, but can tolerate wetness. If left to its own devices it can self-seed and spread by rhizomes.

**CORNUS FLORIDA**  
(FLOWERING DOGWOOD)

Preferring sun to partial shade, the graceful flowering dogwood, commonly grown as a small tree, is susceptible to various diseases and pests when stressed. Burt says she would love to use it all the time, but it has the potential to be finicky. A wide array of cultivars and varieties are available that provide varying amounts of resistance, as well as flower color and size.

**3 ECHINACEA PURPUREA 'MAGNUS'**  
(MAGNUS PURPLE CONEFLOWER)

This popular and versatile cultivar of the purple coneflower produces sizable, magenta flower displays throughout the summer. It can take the heat and the cold, and always “comes back wagging its tail,” Burt says. The cones can either be dead-headed or left for handsome winter interest. If left to its own devices, this plant can self-seed and spread.

**HAKONECHLOA MACRA 'AUREOLA'**  
(HAKONE GRASS)

Prized for its ability to bring a pop of color to shaded areas, this Hakone grass is a low-lying ground cover that slowly spreads and clumps to a height and width of 18 inches. The foliage darkens to a pinkish hue during autumn.

**ILEX VERTICILLATA**  
(COMMON WINTERBERRY)

A deciduous holly native to swampy areas in eastern North America, the common winterberry has a great tolerance of wet, heavy soils. Both a male and a female plant are necessary to produce the brilliant red berry display that persists through winter, sometimes even into early spring.

**4 MERTENSIA VIRGINICA**  
(VIRGINIA BLUEBELLS)

The Virginia bluebells serve as a refreshing sign of spring as they emerge early in the season. The flowers first appear a delicate pink before maturing to their namesake blue. They prefer part to full shade and die down to the ground with the coming of summer.

**NYSSA SYLVATICA** (BLACK GUM)

One of Burt's favorites, this magnificent North American native is prized for its brilliant and consistently excellent display of autumn color. It can tolerate both wet and dry soils to varying degrees due to a long taproot; however, this makes it hard to transplant large, established trees. The female trees produce edible sour berries that attract wildlife.

### RECLAIMED/SALVAGED MATERIALS

Whether using boards from a demolished building or discarded concrete curbs, Burt has found ways to reuse local materials that would otherwise have been thrown away. This may sound like the makings of an eclectic, kitschy design, but these kinds of pieces are so seamlessly integrated into a design that it seems as though they have always been there. ●

(1) KARELJ [GFDL, OR CC BY-SA 3.0], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; (2) STEN PORSE [GFDL, OR CC BY-SA 3.0], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; (3) PUMPKINSKY [CC BY-SA 4.0], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; (4) BARNES DR THOMAS G. U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE [PUBLIC DOMAIN], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT**  
Rough materials such as reclaimed curbs have a weathered patina; one of the many sculptures the clients collect stands before a view of Cleveland; layered colors and textures welcome visitors to the house.



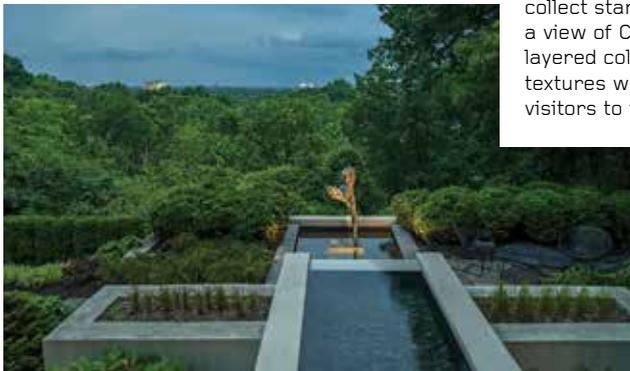
**Contemporary Sculpture Garden,**  
*Cleveland*

This residential garden embodies an eclectic mix of theories and aesthetics that seamlessly blend together with a Zen-like, contemporary charm. Burt says the idea came to her in a dream after she had done an initial tour of the site, where interesting sculptures made an appearance as they walked along. “I asked, ‘What’s that?’ and the owner looks at me and says it’s one of her husband’s sculptures. He just shows up with them,” laughs Burt. “He said, ‘Not bad for a pharmacist from Cleveland!’”

Halves of a large stone sit on either side of the drive as you enter, acting as a symbolic entry gate. Each is punched through with a rectangle built on sacred geometry to frame the house in the distance. Beyond sit towering, mature trees that dot the entry sequence, creating a dappled ceiling of leaves that cast the property in partial shade. Along the way sculptures are revealed and hidden

by naturalistic plantings in subtle hues and textures. The *shin-so* aesthetic (from the Japanese concept of *shin*, meaning most elaborate; *gyo*, intermediate; and *so*, meaning simplified) dominates this design. What should feel grand and modern looks as though it grew from the ground in an organic, weathered way.

A luscious outcropping of red cutleaf Japanese maple, magenta astilbe, hostas, and other plantings gently leads up to the house and wraps around to the back to reveal a dramatic, framed view of downtown Cleveland. Here, built on axis with the front door, is a shallow pool that ends with a sculpture of a muscular headless man dipping his toe into the water. The topography in the back is quite steep, so large, concrete planters help manage the elevation change while also providing a backdrop to plantings of various conifers, grasses, and red cutleaf Japanese maples. ●



BRAD FEINKNOPE, TOP LEFT; VIRGINIA BURT, FASLA, TOP RIGHT; RICHARD MANDELKORN, BOTTOM

**1890s Reclaimed, Cleveland**

Adjacent to the contemporary sculpture garden is another of Burt's designs, though it couldn't be more opposite in aesthetic. The clients brought Burt in to redesign the garden and make it more accessible after they purchased the house next door and demolished it. And when Burt first toured the property, she immediately saw an issue. "Everybody was going to the side door," says Burt, who put in a large stone retaining wall that leads from the driveway to the front door with "céad míle fáilte" carved at the beginning, meaning "a hundred thousand welcomes" in Irish Gaelic.

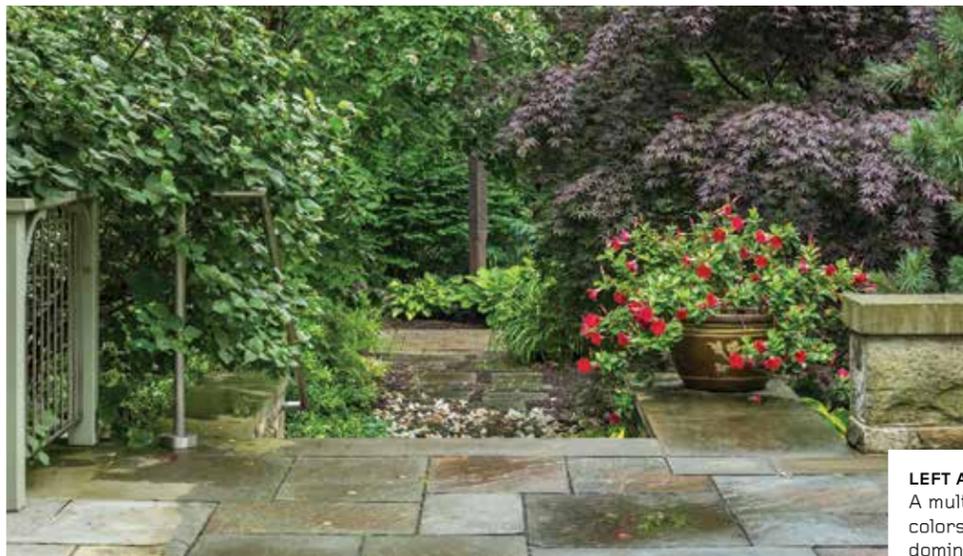
Spotted all along the entryway is a quirky assortment of conifers that Burt says the clients are slowly collecting. But the main draw are the colorful annuals that make appearances all throughout the property. In total, the clients own hundreds of pots that the husband enjoys planting himself every year. "He had 300 pots that were filling the garage to the point where

he couldn't park, and soon neither could she," Burt says. The solution was simple—build potting huts using the timber from the demolished home and other reclaimed materials from the area. While practical in nature, the elegance of the structures complements the colonial cottage vibe of the garden, making the house feel like a rural farm in New England.

The side door is gated off with a lower retaining wall, acting as a subconscious barrier that focuses attention on the main arrival. In this space sits a delicate, ephemeral meditative labyrinth made of Blue Spike grape hyacinth. Nestled nearby are herbs the client planted for her kitchen, which she uses regularly (she trained to be a French chef in Paris). Burt says that while both this and the next-door garden were conceived as healing gardens, they are so different because they reflect the spirit of each client. "These gardens are incredibly meaningful to the people who live here," Burt says. "It's not technique. I think it's touching people's hearts." ●



**LEFT AND BELOW**  
Timber from a house that was demolished on site was repurposed into dual sheds for the clients to store their many flower pots.



**LEFT AND RIGHT**  
A multitude of colors and textures dominate the design.



RICHARD MANDELKORN

RICHARD MANDELKORN, LEFT; BRAD FEINKNOPF, RIGHT

**PLANT LIST**

**PERENNIALS**

(GROUND COVERS AND VINES)

- Alchemilla mollis** (Lady's mantle)
- Anemone x hybrida 'Honorine Jobert'** (Honorine Jobert Japanese anemone)
- Anemone x hybrida 'September Charm'** (September Charm Japanese anemone)
- Aruncus dioicus** (Bride's feathers)
- Astilbe chinensis 'Vision in Red'** (Vision in Red astilbe)
- Astilbe simplicifolia 'Sprite'** (Sprite dwarf astilbe)
- Clematis montana** (Montana clematis)
- Clematis terniflora var. terniflora** (Sweet autumn virgin's bower)
- Coreopsis verticillata 'Moonbeam'** (Moonbeam tickseed)
- Hakonechloa macra 'All Gold'** (All Gold Hakone grass)
- Hakonechloa macra 'Aureola'** (Hakone grass)
- Helleborus orientalis** (Lenten-rose)
- Hosta x 'Golden Tiara'** (Golden Tiara plantain lily)
- Hosta sieboldiana 'Frances Williams'** (Frances Williams plantain lily)
- Hydrangea anomala ssp. petiolaris** (Climbing hydrangea)
- Hypericum calycinum** (Aaron's beard)

- Imperata cylindrica** (Cogon grass)
- Iris germanica** (German iris)
- Iris sibirica 'Caesar's Brother'** (Caesar's Brother Siberian iris)
- Lamprocapnos spectabilis 'Alba'** (White bleeding heart)
- Mentha requienii** (Mint)
- Mertensia virginica** (Virginia bluebells)
- Monarda 'Prairie Night'** (Prairie Night bee balm)
- Perovskia atriplicifolia** (Russian sage)
- Thymus praecox 'Coccineus'** (Red creeping thyme)

**SHRUBS**

- Aesculus parviflora** (Bottlebrush buckeye)
- Buxus microphylla var. japonica 'Winter Gem'** (Winter Gem boxwood)
- Buxus sempervirens 'Vardar Valley'** (Vardar Valley boxwood)
- Chamaecyparis obtusa 'Gracilis'** (Slender hinoki false cypress)
- Clethra alnifolia** (Coastal sweet pepperbush)
- Fothergilla gardenii** (Dwarf witchhazel)
- Hamamelis virginiana** (American witch hazel)
- Hydrangea macrophylla 'Bailmer' ENDLESS SUMMER** (Endless Summer hydrangea)
- Hydrangea quercifolia** (Oakleaf hydrangea)

- Ilex glabra 'Compacta'** (Compact inkberry)
- Pinus resinosa 'Don Smith'** (Don Smith red pine)
- Pinus strobus 'Glauca Nana'** (Glauca Nana eastern white pine)
- Rhododendron 'Boudoir'** (Boudoir azalea)
- Rhododendron x 'P.J.M.'** (P.J.M. rhododendron)
- Viburnum carlesii** (Koreanspice viburnum)
- Viburnum plicatum var. tomentosum 'Summer Snowflake'** (Summer Snowflake viburnum)

**TREES**

- Acer palmatum 'Bloodgood'** (Bloodgood Japanese maple)
- Acer palmatum 'Koto No Ito'** (Koto No Ito Japanese maple)
- Acer palmatum var. dissectum 'Red Dragon'** (Red Dragon Japanese maple)
- Betula nigra** (River birch)
- Cercis canadensis** (Eastern redbud)
- Chionanthus virginicus** (White fringe tree)
- Cornus florida var. rubra** (Pink flowering dogwood)
- Liquidambar styraciflua** (Sweet gum)
- Magnolia stellata** (Star magnolia)
- Picea omorika** (Serbian spruce)
- Quercus rubra** (Northern red oak)
- Stewartia pseudocamellia** (Japanese stewartia)