

Japanese maple provides a beautiful centerpiece for the Stuarts' formal garden.



Photo by Hal Stuart

plant from a seed, or how she waited years for a special vine to bloom. But even while waiting she enjoyed the blooms of the present and the ever-changing beauty of the garden, and she's looking forward to the new surprises in the seasons to come.

A FORMAL SITTING ROOM

The first place we visited also happens to be one of the Stuarts' favorite spots in the garden, their formal, sunken garden. A brick wall, paths and planting beds create a space that includes a sitting area and a small pond filled with big orange koi. While a star magnolia, plenty of hellebores and pink and purple lungwort (*Pulmonaria*) add beauty throughout the space, a Japanese maple is really the centerpiece of this garden.

Twenty years ago the area where this garden stands now was just a grassy bank. It was the vision of Mrs. Stuart and landscape designer Kyle Johnson that helped turn it into the formal beauty seen today. But even after the space was graded, the brick was laid and the initial plantings were in place, it was years of care and love that turned this part of the yard into a beloved spot for relaxing and spending time outdoors.

While the Japanese maple and the towering cherry tree are impressive, the formal garden is also host to

An Evolving Work of Art

BY KAREN M. ALLEY

When you meet a fellow gardener for the first time, it's almost like getting together with an old friend. That's how I felt when I had the privilege of visiting Mrs. Bonnie Stuart's garden in Elkin, N.C. As soon as introductions were completed we immediately began walking around the garden, admiring the fresh, white beauty of the pearl bush, talking about the unusually high pollen count this spring and chatting about mutual acquaintances. Before I knew it two hours had passed.

No matter how long you've been gardening and how experienced you consider yourself, there's always something to learn from talking to a another gardener. I learned a lot in the short afternoon visit spent

with Mrs. Stuart, but maybe the most important thing I learned from her is that a gardener has to have patience. At every place we stopped in our journey around her yard she had a story about how she grew a



Photo by Karen M. Alley



Photo by Hal Stuart

Above: Bonnie Stuart enjoys working in her garden as much as relaxing and entertaining in it.

Left: Special care and thoughtful pruning have helped turn the Stuarts' pearl bush into an admirable specimen.



Photo by Hal Stuart

A rustic birdhouse makes a home for feathered friends in the midst of a sea of daffodils.

a climbing hydrangea, a special find that Mrs. Stuart brought to the garden from a nursery in Winston-Salem about 10 years ago. “I knew it would be a while before I saw any blooms, but after seven years, I started to worry that it would never bloom,” Mrs. Stuart confided.

She happened to mention her worry to another gardener, who said it took seven to eight years for their climbing hydrangea to bloom. Shortly after that conversation, the Stuart’s hydrangea burst into bloom, and it’s added beauty to the garden every summer since.

WORKS IN PROGRESS

The garden room is an amazing area, but it’s not the only special place in the Stuart’s spacious yard. Years ago they bought the neighboring lot behind their house, and now it’s a wonderful, naturalized area filled with hellebores, bulbs and azaleas. The area is entered through a rustic arbor that’s hardly visible under the vines of a yellow Lady Banks climbing rose.

The lesson on patience continued here, where Mrs. Stuart explained how they had planted some miniature azaleas that didn’t make

it through the winter. Rather than getting frustrated at their hard work ending up as a few sticks in the back of the garden, she’s ready to try again.

The Stuarts’ garden is well-established with plenty of plants that have been growing for years, but it’s also an ever-changing work of art where they’re constantly taking out plants that have grown out of their bounds and trying new finds collected from the many different nurseries they visit on travels around the Southeast.

Another inspiration from traveling, albeit rather close to home, is the parterre garden in the front yard. Modeled after Flora Ann Bynum’s garden near the tavern at Old Salem, they’ve created a space split into four quadrants by pebble paths, with an artistic stone outcropping in the middle. Filled with hosta, evening primrose and other perennials, the garden is a neighborhood attraction when in full bloom in mid-summer.

A FAMILY HISTORY

Like many people who are passionate about gardening, Mrs.

Stuart comes from a long line of gardeners. Both her grandmothers had a passion for gardening, and she has fond memories of her one grandmother’s garden full of sweet peas and roses.

It often seems to be common for the gardening talent to skip a generation, Mrs. Stuart’s father has a part in the legacy of her garden. The boxwood that line the front of the yard were propagated by her father and still hold an honored place in the garden.

The Stuart’s garden is a lesson in patience. Trees that were planted when the house was new have grown to maturity 45 years later. Some plants take years to bloom, others might not survive no matter how much coddling they receive, but through it all flowers bloom, shrubs grow and birds and bats find homes in this wonderful habitat.

Hal and Bonnie Stuart have a great place to get out and enjoy the warm Carolina afternoons, whether they’re getting their hands dirty or sitting and enjoying tea by the pond. **cg**



Photos by Hal Stuart

Azaleas and hellebores are just a few of the many plants that bloom throughout the garden in the spring.

