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# A ROCKY MOUNTAIN REFUGE



Sometimes a garden has a feeling of rightness and balance that you can sense the moment you encounter it, just as with a Picasso or a finely made sports car. Nestled in the shadow of Pikes Peak, Jim and Ella Lamphear's half acre Colorado Springs retreat has this quality. Standing at the entrance to their compound feels like reading the lead paragraph of a great book.

The gate to the garden opens to a cloistered corner and immediately the visitor is confronted with a choice of paths going two different directions. One option is a wooden boardwalk leading left underneath a ten foot high canopy of multi-

stemmed shrubs that upon examination, prove to be old fashioned lilacs. Flanked by the high wall of their two story Victorian house, the shady space is a raggedy carpet of neon orange begonias sprinkled with hostas and other shade loving groundcovers. The exact destination of the boardwalk is not quite obvious and so there's a slight air of mystery about it. The lilacs have been pruned to form a sort of oriental screen. This offers a leafy, piecemeal view through the stems of a bench and some raised beds in an as yet unknown part of the garden. At a right angle to the boardwalk, a grassy strip beckons, edged on the left with low blocky yews and enclosed with a bed filled with shrugs

of contrasting foliage. Opposite the yews is a towering line of 'Spartan' junipers and columnar buckthorns resembling a cadre of Buckingham Palace guards, all with their backs to the high garden wall. The path seems to end at a view point occupied by a Grecian style marble statue of Venus.

Gardens are as varied as the world they grow in and so are the gardeners who make them. Some are plant collectors and some are artists. There are disciplined paint-by-the-numbers types, while others create feral spaces that seem more akin to a wildlife refuge than a garden. Occasionally a garden is the work of a philosopher.

Retired English teacher Jim Lam-

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phear is one of the philosophers.

The boardwalk proves to lead to an exceptionally beautiful pond filled with vibrantly colored koi. There's a small waterfall to the right. The boardwalk jogs to the left around the corner of the house and ends at an elegant, elevated wooden deck which Ella has surrounded with big ceramic pots containing huge coppery-hued coleus. The deck is bounded behind by a prim row of *Calmagrostis* 'Karl Forster'.

The boardwalk also leads, often enough, to Lamphear himself, who likes to sit on the deck surveying his garden kingdom with the vigilant eye of a self-taught savant. He has the restless air of an inventor and a tinkerer, ever alert to discern the next refinement that will allow him to tweak his masterpiece.

From the deck, a beautiful rocky stream can be seen, adorned with a tasteful monochromatic metal sculpture resembling a small tree. The thyme-laced granite stones of the adjoining path host a bench framed by a large glossy-leaved mulberry which has been pruned into an angular, Dr. Seuss-ian shape.

This tree turns out to be a symbol of Lamphear's somewhat heretical garden style. It's also the tip of the ice-

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berg  
regard-  
ing the  
many insights  
that he's gathered in his 20  
year career as a garden designer.

"I don't really like perennials," Jim says. "Flower gardens are especially difficult for me. Far too many variables for far too few rewards," he laments. "And most of the leaves look the same. I tried to figure out the heights and the bloom times, and then I had to make sure that the bloom colors will go together and then they are all green and ...." He draws in a breath for the final heresy. "Flowers are boring," he avers. At this point, Lamphear throws up his hands. "That's why God invented pots and containers and books with plans," he declares.

Sure enough, a walk around the continually interesting garden reveals almost no perennials, only quirky shrubs, weeping trees, and plants with peculiarly shaped trunks, contrasting leaves, or interesting bark.

After several failures at making a garden he liked, Lamphear had

his first  
epiph-  
any in  
1991 while  
visiting a local  
gardener's pond.  
There he arrived at  
one of the most important  
of the many tenets that now define  
his personal garden style: "Every  
garden needs at least one water fea-  
ture," he declares.

In addition he's added other requisites to his list. "There must be some open space in the garden," he proclaims. "I also feel that every plant, rock, wall, sculpture, or piece of art must serve a specific purpose," he continues.

Another Lamphearism: "There must always be something fragrant blooming"

Yet another requirement is low maintenance. "We own our garden – it does not own us," he opines. "I tried to make a perennial garden and it was so just much work. I understood then why people give up on their gardens. I will control my garden; it will not control me."

The most profound insight about how to make the garden that he really wanted came when he was again visiting that earlier landscape. This time he saw pines, beeches,

and other woody specimen plants ensconced among rocks and grasses alongside the pond.

"That's when I recognized the style I like," he says. "I love bushes, shrubs, trees evergreens, grasses, boulders and only a few flowers. I love color, texture and shape."

As he articulates the different aspects that he has come to identify with his own style, Lamphear is not being pedantic as much as genuinely enthusiastic. He recommends looking at books, going to other gardens and relentless studying in quest of one's own personal style.

"All you have to do is look, and look, read and talk and look some more," he explains. "Your own preferred style does not have to be a named or recognized type of garden. Rather it is finding a satisfying way of combining plants and hardscapes."

His most endearing lesson is one that transcends specifics altogether: "Learn to find what there is that you truly love," he says. "Not like – love. Every piece must be absolutely incredible by itself."

That said, Lamphear then makes another surprising declaration. "To me, all great gardens have their roots in Japanese design," he states.

Lamphear's garden beckons visitors from one "room" to another along a circuit, and sure enough, it does embody a number of the basic ideas of Japanese design. At every juncture, the next room or feature is not visible until one arrives at a just a certain spot. The lack of perennials, the liberal use of rocks, conifers, quirky weeping or variegated trees



and shrubs, along with the ubiquitous sound and presence of water -- all in fact reflect the principles of Japanese design.

Somewhat un-Japanese, however, is the use of turf grass as a primary flooring in parts of the garden. The Center Garden, as they call it, is a room surrounded by low stone-walled beds which balloon out into an oval space about twenty feet in diameter. There's no path through the grass, so visitors are inclined to meander within the space. There, one source of the sound of water is finally revealed when visitors opt to sit on a bench and soon spot the nearly hidden water feature. It's built low into the stone wall of the opposite flower bed which, as it turns out, shores up the back of the lilacs.

Those lilacs, along with dogwoods, viburnums and conifers like Moorheim spruce and Atlas cedar provide a considerable vertical element, as do some nearby old elm trees that essentially overarch the entire property. These all close in the Center Garden room and create what Lamphear likes to refer to as a "tranquil refuge."

"Gardens should slow one's pace and soften voices," he says. "Within the garden, there should be different rooms, each one serving a different purpose and evoking a different emotion. The goal is to make the sojourner never want to leave."

The exit from the Center Garden leads through a narrow gap and deposits the visitor into the middle of the long grassy path that earlier beckoned from the entry. It's per-

pendicular to the entry path and hidden in the view from the gate until you move really close to it. The experience of walking back through Lamphear's garden in the reverse direction proves to induce the same "come hither" effect as before. This garden works both ways.

Today, Lamphear frequently builds gardens for others. When asked if he works from a master plan, he laughs. "As I begin designing, I focus on the few expensive, knockout focal plants I want and exactly where each will be framed," he explains. But, as he is careful to point out, the completion of each stage requires a reassessment before the next step can be taken.

"Creating beautiful, fulfilling gardens requires so much," he allows. "But taken in stages, the process becomes simple and truly enjoyable. Learn what you truly love. If you don't take the time to know where you want to go, or how to get there, then the journey is fraught with frustration and doomed to failure."

As for the possible rewards, the couple's passion for their piece of Rocky Mountain paradise is obvious. "Our garden comes only after our daughter and our grandchildren," he notes. "We are in the garden from early morning until dusk.."

"I love the creating," Lamphear confesses. "Life without it would be beyond bleak".

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Charles Mann