

Like so many before them, Minnesotans Phyllis and Stan Lehmborg fell in love with Santa Fe long before they moved there to live. They first started coming to “The City Different” 40 years ago to attend the opera, taste the unique cuisine, explore the world-class art galleries and revel in some of the most pleasant year-round weather conditions in the United States.

“We built a second home in Santa Fe in 1990,” Stan explains. “We began living here full time in 1998, when I retired from teaching at the University of Minnesota. Our current house, with its wonderful views of the mountains, was built by a Los Alamos scientist with the unlikely name of Stanley Livingston.”

Having a garden was a part of their Santa Fe agenda from the beginning, but they knew that they were out of their element in the desert Southwest, where the rules are completely different.

“We had a nice, rather large garden in Minnesota,” Phyllis remembers. “It was easy to use water there, but things froze in winter and we had problems with the deer coming in and eating everything.”

To achieve the garden they dreamed of, in spite of their unfamiliarity, the couple sought a local expert whose style, philosophy and temperament corresponded with their own tastes. However, the Lehmborgs did not want just a gardener nor a commercial landscaper. They wanted an artist with whom they could form a creative partnership.

In recent years it has become fashionable to judge the legitimacy of a garden by the amount of dirt under the fingernails of the owner. No do-it-yourself grit means no cred. On the flip side, many gardens are the product of a homeowner simply hiring a contractor and buying a paint-by-numbers installation. The middle ground between these extremes, virtually a relic of a bygone era, is the artist-patron relationship. Art sometimes demands the kind of lifetime commitment and total immersion that leaves little room for commerce. Yet a career in the marketplace does not preclude a passion for art, a passion that the Lehmborgs have always had.

The Lehmborgs found their landscaping Leonardo after seeing the work of Santa Fe veteran garden designer Mark Cherry on a home tour, and then discovering an ad he had placed in a Santa Fe Opera program. “Theirs was the only response I received,” Cherry confesses with a wry smile. That was 15 years ago, and today Cherry is still lavishing a lifetime of skill on the Lehmborgs’

Plants, hardscape and artwork create a strong, unique sense of place in the garden of Phyllis and Stan Lehmborg. Favorite perennials, including red hot poker (*Kniphofia uvaria*; foreground) and blue *Veronica spicata*, suggest the English garden style that the Lehmborgs love, while other choices, like native limestone and groundcovers, celebrate their Santa Fe locale. Meanwhile, the drooping blue-gray branches of Atlas cedar (*Cedrus atlanticus*) mimic the silhouette of the sculpture at the center of the bed, which was crafted by a Navajo artist.

Far-flung styles find perfect balance in this Santa Fe garden ~ words & photography by CHARLES MANN

mountain mix



flowering canvas. He has lived close to the ground, in and among the gardens of Santa Fe, all his life.

While Stan Lehmborg, a professor of English history and author of several books, has written about English country houses and their gardens, it is Phyllis who is the true garden enthusiast. With Mark at the helm, the three of them have been able to merge the means, the expertise, a common spirit and a creative dialog to produce a garden gem.

A TOUR

One visit to the stylish and meticulously kept compound high on the north side of Santa Fe proves this garden is a thoughtfully crafted work of art.

The entry to the stucco-walled retreat is a nondescript wooden gate, a textbook example of the anonymous, low-profile entry to a “secret world” that the Japanese prefer. Santa Fe is, after all, a 17th-century Spanish-inflected city where most homes and courtyards hide behind adobe walls, much like those of Mexico and Portugal—and Japan. In the Lehmborgs’ gravel driveway, two large ceramic pots oozing with petunias are the only hint that something more may be concealed within the yard.

“I’ve always been fascinated by Oriental gardens,” Cherry muses. “I have collected and read books on the subject since I was seven years old. Now, I am influenced by Japanese garden elements, but I have never done a formal Japanese garden.

“I have never made an English garden either,” he adds. “So when I learned that the Lehmborgs like English gardens, I read Gertrude Jekyll and translated some of her principles and ideas into the vernac-

As visitors follow the path leading to the circular courtyard at the rear of the Lehmborgs’ home, they see a strategically placed Amur maple (bottom); as they round the corner the tree drops out of view to reveal the eastern view of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains (right). The courtyard floor combines limestone pavers with creeping thyme, Turkish veronica (*V. liwanensis*) and red-flowering Southwest natives *Penstemon pinifolius* and *Heuchera sanguinea*. The Lehmborgs spend much time on their home’s southside porch (bottom right), which faces a piñon-pine forest. Textural, xeric plants make a fitting transition from garden to this natural landscape (bottom center).



this style is a new paradigm where cultures collide

'Blue Chip' junipers, woolly gray *Tanacetum densum* and *Santolina chamaecyparissus* and purple-spiked *Perovskia atriplicifolia* edge the porch, creating a brushy desert look (far left). The garden also imparts a Japanese feel through its aspen-and-salt-cedar fence (middle) and in its low-key public facade (left).



ular of Santa Fe. I did not copy an English design, but rather allowed these to influence the evolution of the garden.”

Upon stepping through the gate, it is clear that the Lehmberts' sanctuary is neither Japanese nor English in style. It's a blend of sensibilities that takes a bit from all and perhaps reflects a new paradigm arising in the Rocky Mountain West, where cultures collide in a pleasing but unprecedented congress.

Inside the gate, Cherry constructed a narrow flagstone path bordered on the left side by raised beds filled with tall purpleleaf plums (*Prunus cistena*) and underplanted with a shade-tolerant froth of standards like sweet William, plumbago (*Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*) and daylilies. Aspens and soft variegated dogwoods (*Cornus stolonifera* 'Variegata') stand to the right of the path, along with a quirky sculpture that resembles an Australian kookaburra bird. All waded in a thick green bed of *Vinca minor*.

This cool, shady hallway cajoles the visitor onward, toward a small sunken courtyard. A critically placed Amur maple (*Acer ginnala*) obscures the scene until visitors

move along the walk and step to their right, to the edge of the patio. There, they are met with a fabulous view—hovering above the sunken patio, framed by dark green piñon pines and a low wall—of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, which jut up east of Santa Fe.

The small round courtyard is paved with large flagstones that host swatches of creeping thyme, Turkish veronica (*Veronica liwanensis*), red-flowered coral bells (*Heuchera sanguinea*) and saucy red pineleaf penstemon (*Penstemon pinifolius*). A modern aluminum sculpture at the center anchors this circular composition. Low raised beds with walls made of diagonally set local stones feature larger perennials, such as red hot poker (*Kniphofia uvaria*), blue *Veronica spicata* and white Shasta daisies along with pink *Cosmos bipinnatus* and other blowsy annuals. Here, Cherry added some pendulous Atlas cedars (*Cedrus atlanticus*), an unexpected element whose exotic drooping gray branches complement a large sculpture by Navajo artist Fred Begay.

The overall effect is that of a garden art gallery with a certain Southwestern cottage atmosphere. The

soaring mountains compel one's attention to leap from the intimacy of the cloistered patio out to the distant horizon and then back again.

At a few critical spots, Cherry designed and installed some tasteful and very Japanese-looking low fences, made from the shiny red stems of salt cedar and pale peeled aspen branches. “The salt-cedar fences are not just ornamental,” he explains. “We were having problems with rabbits coming into the garden and these fences helped control the rabbits without enclosing the whole garden space.” It's an elegant solution to a common problem.

SOUTHWEST SENSIBILITY

Designing a garden in the Southwest is a complicated business. Privacy, mountain views, water conservation and aesthetics were factors that guided Cherry in defining the overall composition.

“All these things, as well as the site orientation, color, soils, along with the elements of sun, shade, wind, rain, snow and, not least, the desires of the Lehmberts, were involved,” he reflects. “I wanted to integrate the garden with a more natural sense of space and a bigger

role for the view overlooking Santa Fe and the mountains.”

Microclimates play an especially important role in gardening at the 7,000-foot altitude of Santa Fe, where low humidity and very bright sunlight create a unique environment. Western gardens are special in that the powerful sun and thin, cool air generate distinct and intense niches that allow an unprecedented range of plants to be grown in a single garden. “A clear understanding of microclimates and how to use them for best results is essential,” Cherry explains. “Microclimates are a key to being able to grow a huge variety of plants.”

Southwestern soils are also an issue. “In the Lehmbert garden, I worked very hard to make it more amenable to the plants,” he says. “I used lots of compost, an organic fertilizer that enhances soil microbes, sulfur, bone meal, seaweed and fish emulsion. Everything is mulched. Fertilizer is important with poor soils to maintain flowering. Southwestern cities are growing into areas with soils that are shallower, rockier and less fertile, making native plants very wise choices for these gardens.”

One area of the garden that has been especially successful is the long south-facing bank immediately adjacent to the portal, or porch, where the Lehmberts spend a lot of time. Cherry combined workhorse 'Blue Chip' junipers with pale partridge feather (*Tanacetum densum*) and gray lavender cotton (*Santolina chamaecyparissus*) to form an extremely drought-tolerant carpet that has complex but subtle texture and color. He added interest with jets of spiky Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*) to create a tough, low-maintenance, xeric transition between the brick floor of the portal and the adjacent piñon-pine forest.

LESSONS IN DESIGN

Cherry suggests that in the beginning, it is important to have an overall design to establish the basic structure of a garden. That is to say, the “hardscaping” really matters. Getting the bones right is especially critical in Santa Fe in order to allow efficient water harvesting and good drainage and to determine which niches will accommodate particular plants. “I highly recommend developing an overall design at the outset,” he states. “It gives you order

and a place to record changes that determine established patterns.”

Working with the plants, on the other hand, is the thing that drew Cherry into spending a lifetime down near the dirt. “I was always the child who wanted to help in the garden,” he reflects. “The biggest attraction for me is learning new plants and using them in the garden design.” He calls this part of the process the “softscaping.”

When asked whether he regards gardening as an art or a science, Cherry turns inward, reflecting on 40 years of experience. “The lack of science will surely lead to failure in a garden, as you must know what plants need in terms of soil nutrients and microclimates,” he opines. “The lack of art can lead to having everything growing well, yet the design will fall flat due to linear thinking. Growing plants requires science, but a garden requires art!”

CHARLES MANN is a Santa Fe-based photographer who specializes in gardens and Southwest culture and landscapes. His work has appeared in many books and magazines and he frequently contributes “Garden Visit” features to *Horticulture*. Learn more about Charles at his website, charlesmannphotography.com.