

MOUNTAIN HOME

A cabin garden
shines the light
on up-close plants
as well as far-off views

words by **Karin Ursula Edmonson**
photographs by **Mark Loete**

Love inspires gardeners to undertake bold and wonderful projects, bestowing the gumption to experiment when plant tags and books advise otherwise. The Bellar Garden, the private Catskills cabin garden of Mel and Peg Bellar in Andes, N.Y., is the result of such courageous devotion to the art of garden making, where big, beautiful creations arise out of intentional and accidental passions.

For eight years, Mel and Peg's garden has welcomed me at the end of my 45-minute drive from the other side of the Catskills. It is one of my favorite garden spaces, a place where my soul flutters down amid the flowers to settle into herbaceous beauty and breathe.

OVERVIEW

At 1,500 square feet, the Garden Proper sits at the front of the wood-beamed cabin. It is a place of beauty and magic where garden vignettes and varied plant combinations appear around each new curve in the path.

Former city dwellers who honed a passion for horticulture on a Manhattan rooftop, Mel and Peg bought the land and cabin in 2001; the property

Tall prairie perennials and grasses line the curves of the Spiral Garden at Mel and Peg Bellar's home in New York's Catskills. Mel chose the plants as an ode to the area's meadows.

was merely another cleared plot with a house plopped on center. "The hill went straight up and the driveway, straight down," they recall. Landscape construction began in 2003 and since then the garden evolved from a vaguely connected milieu of passalong plants and random purchases to a cohesive kaleidoscope of perennials, shrubs, bulbs, vines and groundcovers that work together.

Mel's subsequent education at the New York Botanical Garden and current career as a sought-after Catskill landscape designer prompts him to constantly edit, edit, edit. He often reworks, rearranges and enhances early foibles, at the same time experimenting with new plant material. An exceptional result is the proliferation of tall plants like 'Lemon Queen' and 'Hellman' sunflowers (*Heliopsis helianthoides* 'Lemon Queen' and 'Hellman'), cup plant (*Silphium perfoliatum*), meadowrue (*Thalictrum*), New York ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*) and angelica (*Angelica archangelica*), which cast an *Alice in Wonderland* aura on the garden areas they inhabit. As someone pushing six feet tall, I appreciate towering plants that transport me to a dreamy world of color, scent, buzzing bees and flitting butterflies—all at my eye level.

Beds are layered with perennials of varying heights for incredible fullness, but the heart of each bed is a woody focal point. In season, these dwarf trees and shrubs—Kousa dogwood (*Cornus kousa*), dwarf weeping crab apple (*Malus*), Harry Lauder's walking stick (*Corylus avellana* 'Contorta'), devil's walking stick (*Aralia spinosa* 'Variegata'), gold cone juniper (*Juniperus communis* 'Gold Cone'), boxwood (*Buxus*)—harmonize with the larger herbaceous beauty. In winter, stripped of the profusion, they transform into plant architecture that gathers and holds snow in the minimalist winter garden. The woody trees and shrubs also serve to link the garden with the larger borrowed view of the Catskill Mountains to the southeast.

A TOUR

The Garden Proper centers around

a pondette with a grouping of three bronze cranes given to the couple on their wedding. Growing in water is hardy water lily (*Nymphaea*), pickerel weed (*Pontederia cordata*) and Japanese water iris (*Iris ensata*). The area surrounding the pondette is thickly planted with shrubs and perennials including 'Autumn Bride'

alumroot (*Heuchera villosa* 'Autumn Bride'), *Sedum* 'Autumn Fire' and *S. kamtschaticum*, big root geranium (*Geranium macrorrhizum*), variegated obedient plant (*Physostegia*), big-leaf rocket plant (*Ligularia dentata* 'Desdemona') and black cohosh (*Actaea racemosa*). It is a place of disarming beauty, vibrant color and

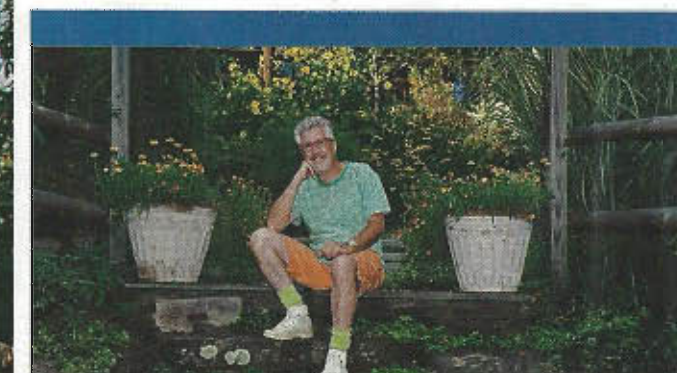
textural interplay that transcends busyness due to artful plant placement, like the semi-circular sweep of 'Autumn Bride' hugging the bed and drawing the eye out to the fieldstone pathway, bronze arbor star and giant boulder staircase beyond.

Within the Garden Proper, the Conifer Garden bridges the area

from the driveway to the cabin's wide front steps. Thickly planted with five juniper cultivars ('Hetzi Columnaris', 'Gold Lace', 'Holger', 'Blue Star' and 'Gold Cone'), three blue spruces (*Picea pungens* 'Sester Dwarf', 'Globosa', 'Fastigiata') two dwarf blue spruces (*P. glauca* 'Alberta', 'Alberta Blue') and one

A rustic arbor and split-rail fence usher visitors to explore the garden.





BELLAR'S BEST MEL'S FAVORITE PLANTS

- Autumn Bride alumroot (*Heuchera villosa* 'Autumn Bride'): Very reliable. I love the light green foliage and I enjoy the blooms. The fact that it flowers in August and looks good into October is a wonderful attribute.
- Bigroot geranium (*Geranium macrorrhizum*): Miracle plant. It blooms for several weeks and then provides a dense cover that rarely allows weeds to poke through; nice fall color; the deer don't eat it; easy to propagate. Plant the sprigs on a one-foot grid for complete cover the next year.
- Sedges (*Carex flacca* 'Blue Zinger' & *Carex appalachica*): New discoveries that are strong performers with beautiful foliage that fills out nicely. The *flacca* seems to do well in the sun or shade; the *appalachica* is fine cut and has a nice fountain shape. Both deer proof.
- Catmint (*Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low'): Alluring blue-green foliage; long-blooming, great lavender substitute en masse. Looks great again after getting cut back after first round of blooms fade. Very reliable and deer proof.
- Serbian spruce (*Picea omorika*): Vertical columnar spruce with a subtle weeping habit and great character. In our area it is one of the few problem-free, interesting conifers.
- Ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*): Be careful to choose the cultivars that don't get the powdery mildew. Love the colorful leaves, nice blooms, vase-like habit.
- Smooth hydrangea (*Hydrangea aborescens*): All-purpose shrub with nice foliage, great flowers that last a long time. Looks good through the winter; not too tall; easy to propagate. Super reliable, but the deer can do damage.
- Hardy hydrangea (*H. paniculata*): Reliable, variety of sizes with some color variation. I have recently become fond of the new smaller varieties: Little Lime, Bobo. I'm looking forward to trying Little Quick Fire.
- Switchgrass (*Panicum* spp.): Native grasses that don't flop and the deer don't eat them. Ruby Ribbons is a favorite, but I love 'Northwind', 'Cloud Nine' and 'Shenandoah'.
- Boxwood (*Buxus* 'Green Gem' & 'Green Mountain'): Structural, evergreen bones that add very simple formality in the garden—never as hedges but only as organizing accents. The deer don't eat them.
- Ornamental onion (*Allium* 'Summer Beauty' and 'Millennium'): Late summer splash of purple. Very hardy. These look great with almost anything. Deer proof!—Mel Bellar

Shrubs and perennials surrounding the Garden Proper's tiny "pondette" take on fall colors in unison with the surrounding hillscape.

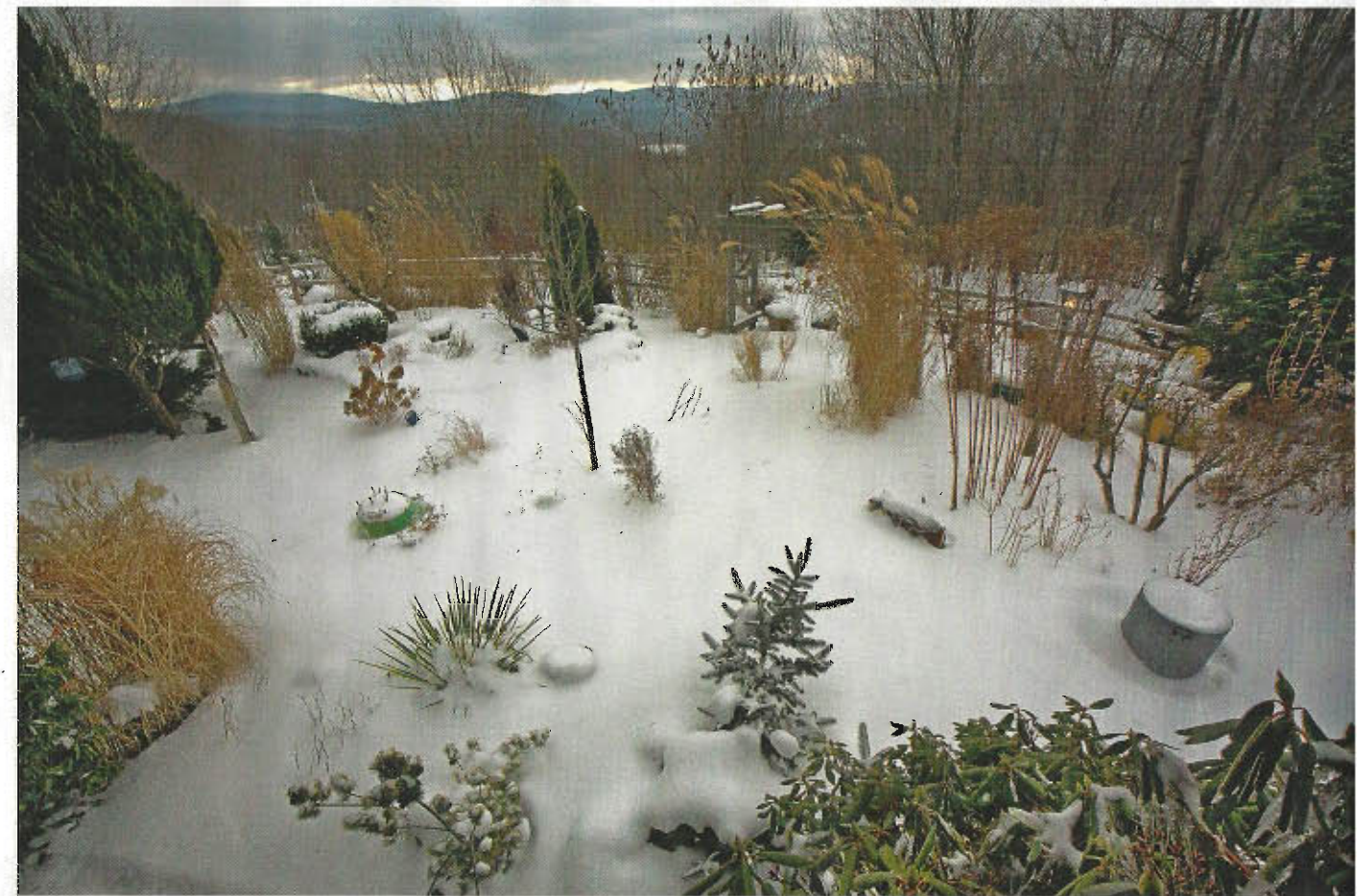


Top: Threadleaf bluestar (*Amsonia hubrichtii*) marks the path to a seating area along with tall grasses. Above: The late-summer flowers of golden feverfew create an interesting echo with a lichen-dotted stone wall.

each of Serbian spruce (*P. omorika* 'Pendula'), American arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Rheingold') and sawara cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera Aurea'), it is an area of the garden that is especially beloved in winter. The conifers are welcoming green sentinels in the six-month gray, white and brown frozen landscape. To keep their shape, Mel

and Peg prune, thin and sculpt the conifers often. Underplantings of Japanese spikenard (*Aralia cordata* 'Sun King'), lungwort (*Pulmonaria*), sedge (*Carex* 'Silver Sceptre') and the oddly named Canby's mountain lover (*Paxistima canbyi*) provide additional seasonal color and textural variation.

Expanded and completed in 2016, the Spiral Garden sits over the leach field at the sunny, west side of the cabin. The original spiral planting of 3,000 daffodils in a meadow area evolved into the current configuration because of constant mowing to keep the daffodil foliage intact. As an ode to the area's meadow roots, Mel employed prairie perennials and grasses like hyssop (*Agastache* 'Blue Fortune'), baptisia (*Baptisia sphaerocarpa* 'Screamin' Yellow'), mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*), pink coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), giant Helen's flower (*Helianthemum autumnale*), big bluestem and its cultivar 'Rain Dance' (*Andropogon gerardii*, A.g. 'Rain Dance'), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*



Above: Evergreen shrubs provide structure through the winter, as do the ornamental grasses and seedheads of tall perennials that Mel leaves standing in the garden.

'Blaze'), Ruby Ribbons switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum* Ruby Ribbons 'RR1') and wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa* 'Claire Grace'). Pea gravel paths and metal edging elevate the spiral planting to effective and evocative garden art with a spirit of its wild Catskill provenance.

At the rear of the house a grand swath of ornamental grasses softens the transition of a steep slope to level land and exemplifies the sort of happy accident several extra plug trays and divisions can create on the fly. Five *Miscanthus* cultivars ground the curving 50-foot long bed: 'Gigantus', 'Stricta', 'Variegata', 'Gracillimus' and 'Purpureum'. Foerster's feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster') and several native switchgrasses (*Panicum* Ruby Ribbons, 'Northwind', 'Cloud Nine') fill out the bed with differing habits and understated color.

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

The gardens began as a partnership between Mel and Peg and with

the passing of time their roles have evolved.

"Mel is the master of the garden," says Peg. "I am a huge pruner, but I devote most of my attention to the container garden full of herbs and special peppers outside the kitchen." There is seldom a summer day that Peg, a passionate and inventive cook, does not cut from the herb garden to enhance her dishes. She also creates floral displays for staging photos for her Catskills real-estate business. When Mel speaks of Peg's role in the garden, it's clear she is the muse.

"She is responsible for introducing me to ornamental grasses, for the Conifer Garden happening and for the Spiral Garden moving from the mown spiral to the hardscaped realization," he says. "She is now pushing for a tiered patio below the wall and integrating a pavilion, fire pit and water feature!"

Four-season garden interest is a necessity in the Catskills. Winters linger long into March and April; trees don't leaf out until mid-May.

Mel's current focus is brightening up early spring. In a bulb spree last fall, he planted 500 each of *Chionodoxa lucillae*, *Fritillaria meleagris* and *Allium moly* 'Jeannine', partly to ease Peg's disaffection for March and April and also because dramatic cover is the only way for the bulbs to really have a splashy effect.

Mel and Peg continue to work on and love their garden because "even if someone may not consciously realize it, just being in the presence of a garden and nature has a profound effect on your soul." ❧

KARIN URSULA EDMONDSON is a writer and landscape designer working in New York's Hudson Valley and Catskills regions (kulandscapes.com). More of MARK LOETE's work can be found at markloetephoto.com.