

# an artful composition

This Connecticut garden is drawn to perfection thanks to a painter's eye for strong design

**T**he best gardeners paint with plants, and Lynden Miller was a painter long before she began to garden. It wasn't until Lynden toured the gardens of England, however, that she discovered how to turn a garden into art.

When a painter sits in front of a blank canvas, she begins by creating a good, strong composition and then fills in the colors. Lynden's education as a painter coupled with what she learned in England showed her the importance of establishing a pleasing composition to achieve successful results in the garden. She decided to approach her 5½-acre property as a blank canvas upon which she must first draw an outline before applying the forms, textures, and colors of plants. Her garden plan began with a bold stroke: a 200-foot-long hedge, initiating a design Lynden has built upon for more than 30 years.

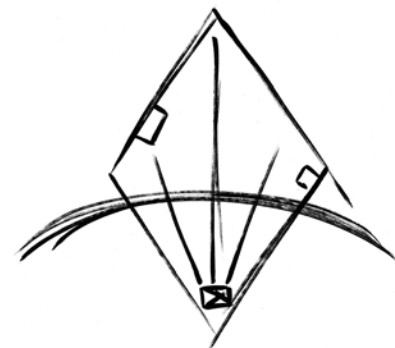
#### **A DESIGN THAT STARTED WITH A SINGLE STROKE**

The shape of the property, an elongated diamond with the house in a corner, posed challenges due to its odd, angular dimensions (illustration, p. 48). Lynden looked at the overhead view of the plan as if it were a canvas on her easel and responded by drawing a bold arc across the bottom of the diamond. The arc instantly enlivened the composition by breaking the static outline into more interesting shapes.

Out in the garden, the line became a tall yew hedge (*Taxus × media* 'Hicksii', USDA Hardiness Zones 5–7) from which the larger garden composition arose. It

The layout of the main border (left) sets the stage for a garden composed of individual spaces filled with select plant combinations (above).





### Starting with a sketch

Lynden approached her property as a blank canvas and started the design with a sketch. The bold arc across the bottom of the diamond (above) became the yew hedge (left). She then drew focal lines through to the rest of the property.

instantly defined a lawn area near the house and also served as the backdrop for a main border. The solidity of the hedge, however, cut off any connection between the house and the larger landscape, so Lynden cut three openings in it to lead eyes and feet out to explore other garden spaces.

The central opening in the hedge (photo, facing page) is located directly across from the back patio and leads to the meadow. When you sit on the back patio, your eyes are enticed through this opening, down a mowed path, into the meadow, ending at a bench placed beneath an arbor as a focal point. A series of arches found in the bench back, arbor, and gateway provide a sense of continuity and purposeful artistry as they echo the arc of the hedge and the semicircular patio from which the view originates.

The other two openings in the hedge lead to secondary focal points added to complete the composition. The lines created by these openings radiate like spokes on a wheel, connecting the visitor's gaze to gateways that lead to the rest of the garden. The western spoke extends past the woodland toward a swimming pool. The eastern spoke is aligned with the crab-apple walk. Adjacent to this elegant little allée is a sequence of small garden rooms: the four-square garden, the raised garden, the experimental cottage garden, and the pond. The composition of the smaller

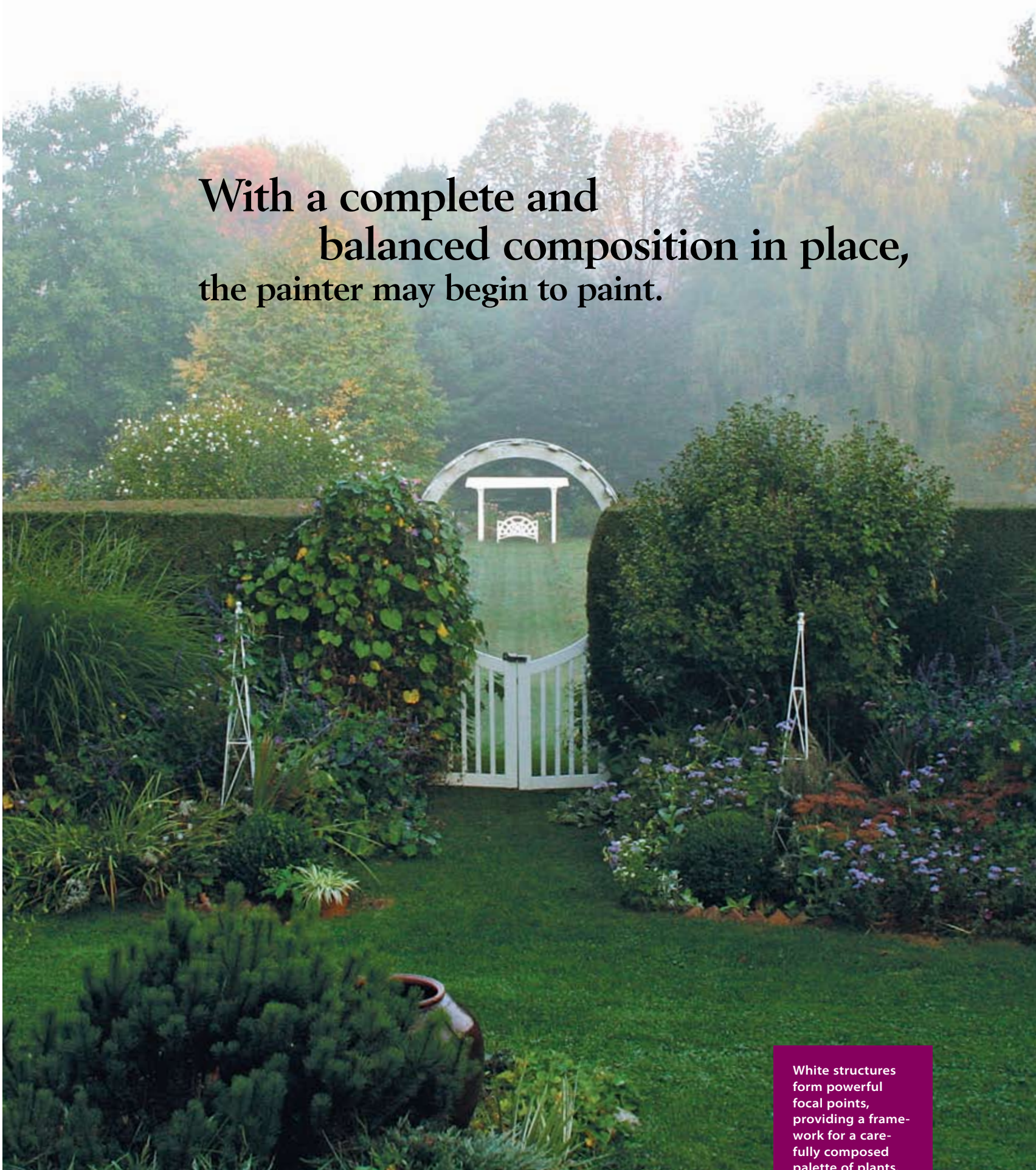
spaces, though asymmetrical, feels balanced because the shape and location of each garden was planned as a part of a larger, complete composition.

### A PALETTE OF PLANTS FILLS THE FRAME

With a complete and balanced composition in place, the painter may begin to paint. Beginning gardeners often incorrectly fixate on color first, focusing on inexpensive and easily planted flowering annuals. The novice then graduates to more permanent plants, like perennials, and begins to experiment with texture and form. Finally, with an eye toward overall structure and ambition for less maintenance, the experienced gardener introduces small trees and shrubs in an attempt to create the bones of their border. This learning curve often results in costly revisions that impede a garden's progress.

Lynden, however, took these steps in the opposite order. With the yew hedge as a backdrop, she started placing key shrubs to establish a formal rhythm to mark the gateways cut into the hedge and tie the border together. Spires of pyramidal eastern arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Pyramidalis', Zones 2–7) and broad Montgomery blue spruce (*Picea pungens* 'Montgomery', Zones 2–8) punctuate the areas between the gateways with a striking combination of con-

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White structures form powerful focal points, providing a framework for a carefully composed palette of plants.





The abundance of flower and foliage found in the experimental cottage garden (below) assumes a more refined, sophisticated style when translated to the formally composed main border (left).

trasts in form and color. To unite such a large border, Lynden repeats the dynamic coupling of the opposing shapes of floppy hydrangeas (*Hydrangea macrophylla* cvs., Zones 6–9) with closely clipped balls of edging boxwoods (*Buxus sempervirens* ‘Vardar Valley’, Zones 6–8) in regular intervals along its length.

To this rhythm of shrubs she added perennials, such as the bold form of ‘Aphrodite’ hostas (*Hosta plantaginea* ‘Aphrodite’, Zones 3–9), which have the visual weight of shrubs. Fine-textured miscanthus grass (*Miscanthus sinensis*, Zones 4–9, photo, left) excites the eye wherever it extends above the hedge, and ‘Bright Eyes’ phlox (*Phlox paniculata* ‘Bright Eyes’, Zones 4–8, photo, left) enlivens the border with long-lasting color in key locations, which are further enhanced by the color echoes of purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea* ‘Magnus’, Zones 3–9).

The only annuals Lynden grows—the stray, self-sown violet excepted—are what she calls “plants that pay the





The crab-apple walk, one of the three lines that cut through the main hedge, links the cottage garden (located behind the white arbor gate) to the rest of the property.

rent.” ‘Blue Horizon’ ageratum (*Ageratum houstonianum* ‘Blue Horizon’, annual), tall verbena (*Verbena bonariensis*, Zones 7–11), and ‘Indigo Spires’ sage (*Salvia* ‘Indigo Spires’, Zones 8–11) provide extended—sometimes season-long—interest through flowers, foliage, form, or all three combined.

Designed correctly, a sequence of blooms can provide textures and colors that last through the growing season. A notable example is in Lynden’s crab-apple walk (photo, above), where grape hyacinths (*Muscari armeniacum* and cvs., Zones 4–8) start the spring with a fragrant display, followed by daffodils (*Narcissus* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–9) chosen to complement the remaining grape hyacinths, then daylilies (*Hemerocallis* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–10) flowering reliably through the summer, and finally ‘Blue Horizon’

ageratum planted to mask the spent daylily foliage with a bounty of bright blue flowers, until the frosts knock the garden down, leaving only the winter bones of the well-ordered tree trunks.

#### EXPERIMENTS WITHIN AN ESTABLISHED SCHEME

Lynden believes that horticulture is the art of moving plants around, and because she can see the main border from almost every room in her house, she recognizes—and continually acts upon—opportunities to refine her plant combinations. She prefers contrast over harmony, and because contrast is difficult to do well, the cottage garden has become an experimental haven where Lynden can observe the subtlety or brashness of plant groupings without committing them to the main border. In the cottage garden, she tests plant performance and fearlessly combines

# What began with a single inspired stroke has become a horticultural work of art.

plants with a freedom evident in the exuberant crush of specimens crowded in this small garden room.

On the opposite side of the property, Lynden practices a different kind of gardening. In the woodland, masses of hosta (*Hosta* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–9, photo, below) fill the forest floor beneath the 100-year-old sugar maples as they shade out competing weeds.

The newest addition to this carefully composed garden plan is the pond (photo, right). Its completion marks a new beginning, as Lynden explores a different palette of plants that are suited to the wet soil at the water's edge, from prim-roses (*Primula* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–8) to dawn redwoods

(*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, Zones 5–10). It has become her favorite spot in the garden, where, in the morning, she greets her aquatic friends, the frogs, and plays



with the aquatic plants chosen to provide them with a welcome environment. Though the pond may be separated—by several yards and many years—from the hedge that launched this garden, they are both parts of a garden drawing near perfection. What began with a single inspired stroke across the landscape has become a horticultural work of art. ☞

Woodland ground covers, like Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola', Zones 5–9, below), and the aquatic plants at the pond (above) allow Lynden to experiment with different palettes.

