

A photograph of a garden with a stone path leading through greenery. A wooden fence with a lattice gate is visible. In the background, there's a house with a grey roof and various trees and plants, including a red-leafed tree.

American Garden Design  
Inspired by the Japanese  
Way of Tea

# A TEA GARDEN IN TIVOLI

Bettina Mueller





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Japanese Way of Tea*

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*Beginning*









## *A sense of place*

**M**y garden story begins with a deed from the 1860s that describes my property as “... commencing at a post set at the northeast corner of P. Wilson Fingar’s land, and the west side of the road leading to Cook’s Mill ...”

My quarter-acre of land is in Tivoli, a village of about 1,100 people in the Hudson Valley, two hours north of New York City. My Victorian farmhouse is on a street with neighbors to the right and left. I can walk into town for Mexican, Japanese, vegetarian or bistro food and to visit the post office, artist co-op or library, but I have to drive five miles to the grocery store.

When I moved here, there was no garden. The only place with enough southern exposure to grow flowers was a thin strip of land covered by a blacktop driveway that came all the way down the south side of the house to the back door. It stopped at a metal shed that stood on a slab of concrete. Ugly cement blocks, heaved unevenly by the frost of countless winters, formed a path to the back door.

Behind the house, the small backyard was surrounded by neighboring yards. The property had no plantings, no view, no vista, and little space for a garden.

It was perfect for what I had in mind.



## *Tivoli—a pattern language*



**Downtown Tivoli** *A Pattern Language*, by Christopher Alexander, is the definitive study of what makes buildings, streets, and communities work. Our village recently spent two years defining how to shape the future based on the design principles of this book.



The village of Tivoli is a charming collection of Victorian houses and estates. It is one of the few places I know that hasn't changed through modern development, though little by little, it is being discovered. At Bard College, which is five minutes away, the Frank Gehry-designed Fisher Center for the Performing Arts hosts dance and theater companies from around the world. In the center of town, a famed painter and his wife purchased Tivoli's 100-year-old hotel, filled it with contemporary art, and turned it into a five-star destination. Tivoli is "Brooklyn on the Hudson," according to The New York Times, with "an effortlessly hip and creative edge."

My challenge was to design a Japanese-influenced garden in the backyard of this Victorian enclave and make it feel as though it had always been here.



**My neighbors in Tivoli** This is a rural village with some wonderful Victorian architecture. These houses on my street were built later than my simple farmhouse and have been embellished with lots of classic ornamentation. In the lower right, a neighbor across the street lives in a house created from a 19th century church.



## *The gardens*

When we moved to Tivoli from San Francisco in the cold winter of 1999 it felt like we had stepped back in time to the 1950s. In the house, the downstairs rooms were carpeted with green shag rugs, walls were covered with plastic walnut paneling, and harsh fluorescent lights hung from drop ceilings. We spent that first winter pulling down the lights and prying off the paneling to reveal spacious rooms connected by pocket doors with original Victorian brass fixtures. We painted the rooms white, yellow and Pompeii red.

That spring we got to work on the garden. Our first project was to replace the driveway with raised beds for flowers, herbs, and vegetables. We chipped out the blacktop and hauled it away. Underneath was clay-heavy soil that is difficult to cultivate unless you amend it with lots of compost. It was easier to bring in good soil for the raised beds than to dig out the clay.

I took out the foot-thick cement blocks that formed the uneven pathway and hauled the broken-down shed to the dumpster. I designed a new walkway inspired by traditional Japanese tea gardens and formed of deep blue sandstone from a local quarry. The thin, rectangular

stones skirt the side of the house and go past the raised beds. As the path begins to curve toward the back patio, the stones scatter and become irregular in shape and size. I later used the same combination of linear and abstract design for a path in my backyard tea garden.

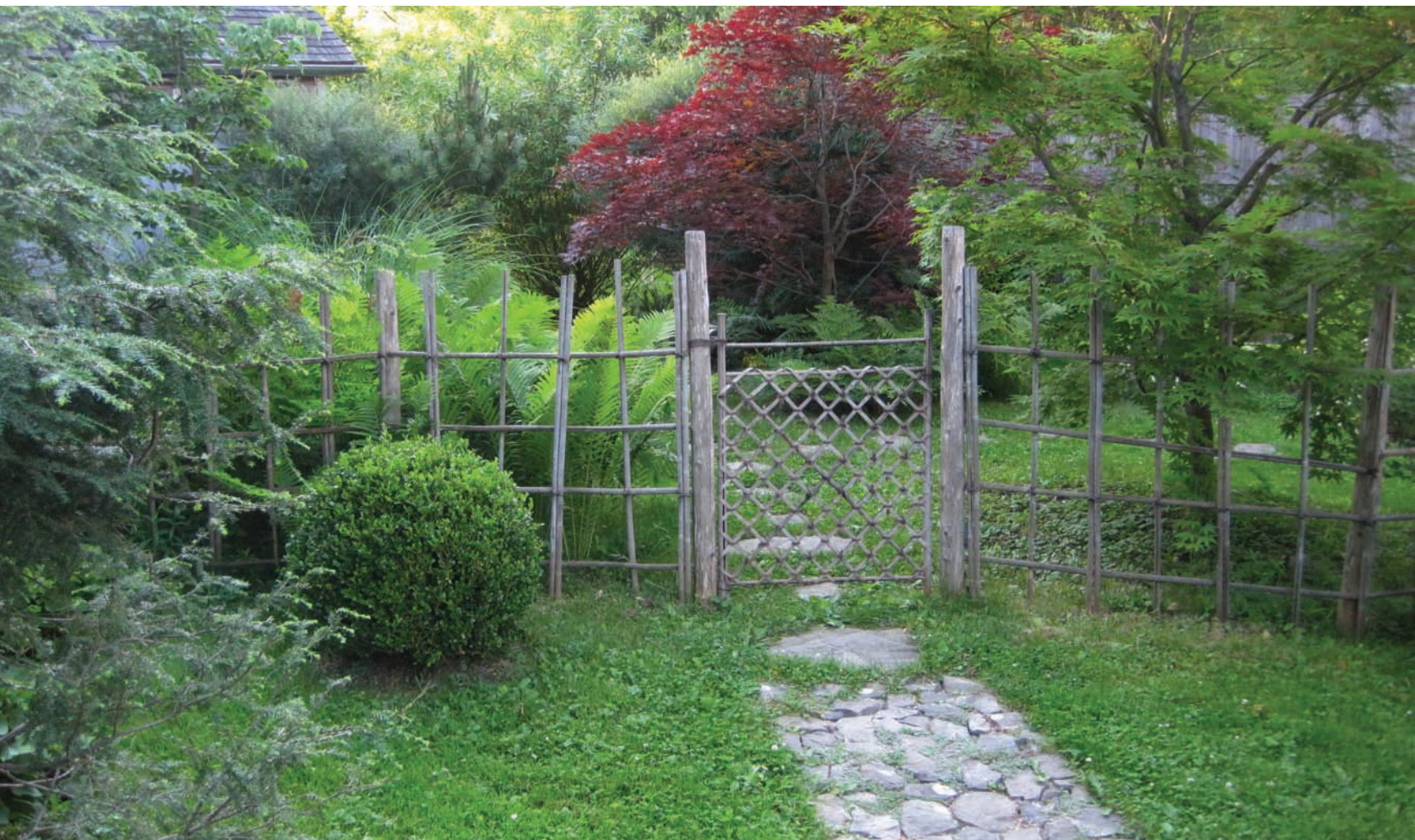


**above and right** The pathway of two-by-three-foot bluestone slabs comes straight down the side of the house past the raised beds. As the path begins to curve toward the back door, various sizes and shapes of stone are arranged in a scattered pattern, a mixing of formal and informal inspired by Japanese tea gardens.



**above** Raised beds on the southern side of the house where the driveway used to be. Raised beds should be six feet by three feet so you can lean in to weed, plant, or mulch without stepping onto the soil.





*Gathering mums within  
the eastern bamboo fence,  
distantly gazing at  
the southern hills  
- T'ao Yuan Ming*



## *The teahouse*

**I**t was always my dream to have a place to make tea for friends. It needed to be an empty room at least nine feet square. My house didn't have the space, but I did have a tiny patch of ground in the backyard.

In Japan in the 16th and 17th centuries, tea was a dynamic part of the culture. Poetry and tea gatherings took place in thatched huts built in the backyard gardens of city homes. In these urban refuges, merchants and warlords cultivated one another. Tea gatherings framed discussions of war and trade, but they also were occasions for the appreciation of art, architecture, interior design, food preparation, and gardening.

In the spirit of these modest retreats, I designed a small teahouse for the back of my property. I hoped it would be what Rikyu, the great tea master of the 16th century, called “a place of tranquility.”



**My backyard** I built my teahouse on this tiny triangular plot. The building measures 15 by 15 feet.









**Dutchess County** Until about 20 years ago, dairy farms were a common sight around Tivoli. These barns are all within a 10-minute drive of my house. I love the decorative doors, but kept mine very simple.



## *A challenge*



**Transition** The challenge in designing the tea garden was to create a seamless transition from the front of the house with its overflowing flower beds to a garden of quiet restraint.



After building the teahouse, my challenge was twofold: to build a roji, the garden and path that leads to the teahouse, and to connect it to my front-yard garden and Victorian house. How were people going to move through the space? How was it going to feel? What would draw them forward? How could I create a sense of progression and transition from a colorful and varied cottage garden to a space that was contemplative and natural?



**Newly finished** The teahouse just after it was completed. The sliding barn doors hide French glass doors that open out to the garden. We have seeded the ground and I am starting to plan the pathway for the roji tea garden.







## *Roji - the tea garden*

**R**oji means “dewy ground,” a garden space one passes through leaving the dust of the world behind. When Rikyu was asked how to design a garden for the teahouse, he said it should have a lonely feeling like the scene described in this poem by Saigyō:

*Fallen red oak leaves  
artlessly scatter and collect.  
The loneliness of the path  
to a deep mountain temple.*











*Scattered stepping stones—Tobi-Ishi*



**Moss** This path from a tea garden in Japan is set in a ground cover of moss. It's important not to choose stones that are exotic or call too much attention to themselves. They should fit into the landscape as if they had always been there.





The tea garden should be as green as possible. Conifers, broad-leaf evergreens, ferns, and green ground covers are used. Planting should be simple and naturalistic with only a few varieties of shrubs or trees. Nothing should stand out or distract from the way to the teahouse. This is a garden that is meant to focus you inwardly. It is reduced to its essential qualities — a contemplative space filled with light and shadow.





## *Landscaping guides*

Use evergreen trees and shrubs as much as possible.

Prune naturally.

Avoid flowering plants.

Too much variation in plant material is distracting.

Avoid trees and shrubs with different colors and leaf structure.

Avoid rare and fantastic boulders and rocks.

Use native plants, trees, and shrubs.

Do not plant anything that stands out or is exotic.

Avoid plants and shrubs with thorns and unpleasant odors.

-- Adapted from the  
Urasenke Foundation









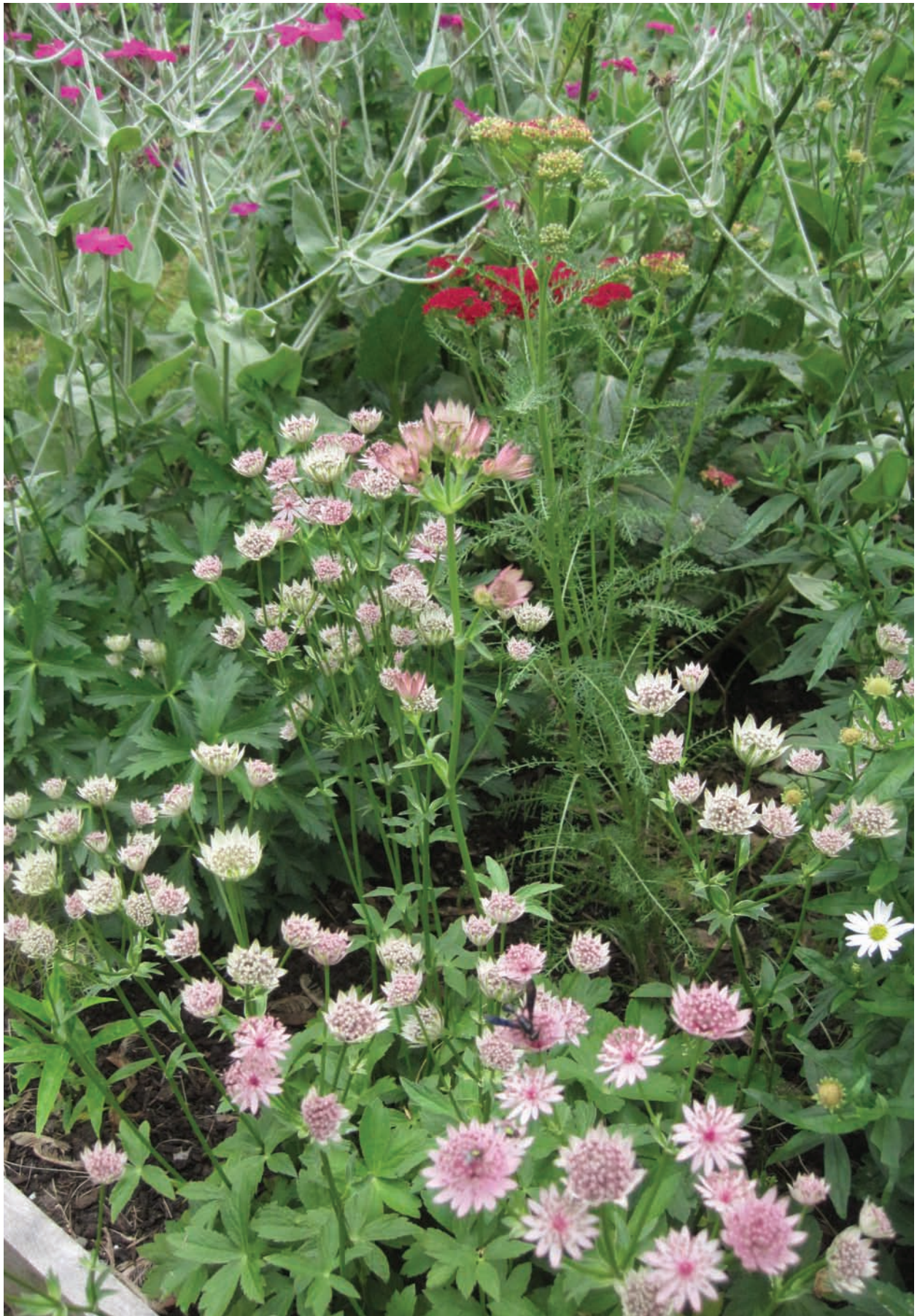
**Autumn flowers** Bush clover *Lespedeza japonica*, known in Japan as “Hagi,” is one of the seven grasses of autumn. It is mentioned in many verses of the Manyōshū poetry anthology compiled in the ninth century. Hagi is associated with dew and fleeting qualities of life. It was one of the first things I planted in my garden. I love how it cascades over my front porch in autumn.





C habana flowers are simple and unassuming, like those that grow by the side of the road, or ephemeral, like those that grow in the shade of the woods. Colors tend to be soft and blossoms small and delicate. These qualities give my flower gardens a “Tea” style.







## *Chabana cutting garden*



**above and opposite page** My flower beds are filled to overflowing in June. Favorite tea flowers include red yarrow and pale pink astrantia, also known as a masterwort — a cottage garden favorite.

**top right** In selecting flowers for Chabana it's best to choose ones that have different types of leaves that complement one another: the yarrow has soft, fuzzy segmented leaves, the rose campion has silver woolly leaves.

**bottom right** Wonderful tea flowers: *Campanula punctata* 'Canterbury Bells,' *Anemone canadensis*, prized for its pure white flower and distinct leaf, and the self-seeded rose campion. The gardens have a free and natural feel to them.

**below** Foxglove and *Alchemilla* are great for tea when the flowers are small. Both are traditional cottage garden perennials.











One spring, as I was walking through my garden with a friend, she pointed to a flower tucked away in a corner. It was a trillium. You are not allowed to pick these in the wild. I had no idea it was in the garden, hidden away in the deep shade. This native is admired for its flower and the three large leaves that dress it. It looks wonderful in this bamboo vase designed in the shape of an arrow quiver by the Japanese artist and craftsman Matsumoto Hafu.





A pale pink camellia with a branch of magnolia. The vase is by the American potter, Frances Palmer.



## *A Chabana lesson*



**Flowers for Chabana** Late summer flowers blooming in my garden: red persicaria 'Firetail', salvia 'Black and Blue', oakleaf hydrangea, a pink mallow, and the yellow flower is a wild parsnip that self-seeded. We'll select a few of these flowers for Chabana.







## *Resources*

### The Urasenke Tradition of Tea

Urasenke Foundation of California  
2143 Powell Street  
San Francisco, CA 94109  
[www.Urasenke.org](http://www.Urasenke.org)

### Green Gulch Zen Center

1601 Shoreline Highway,  
Muir Beach, CA 94965  
[www.sfzc.org/ggf](http://www.sfzc.org/ggf)

### *Japanese Garden Designers*

#### Marc Peter Keane

119 Irving Place  
Ithaca NY 14850-4711  
[www.mpkeane.com](http://www.mpkeane.com)

#### Asher Browne Ltd.

P.O. Box 303  
Saddle River, NJ 07458  
[www.asherbrowne.com](http://www.asherbrowne.com)

### *Japanese Garden Tools*

#### Hida Tool & Hardware Co., Inc.

1333 San Pablo Avenue  
Berkeley, CA 94702  
[www.hidatool.com](http://www.hidatool.com)



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These few pages were just a preview. To find out more about Bettina's new book and how you can order a copy click here:

[www.TeaGardenBook.com](http://www.TeaGardenBook.com)

