



# THE MAKING OF THREE GARDENS

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*Foreword by  
The Duke of Devonshire*

**MERRELL**



TURTLE BLUFF

This very special garden is on one of the most dramatic sites in Palm Beach, at the second highest elevation in the town. It's a rare opportunity to be able to use this change of elevation. The site juts out into the ocean, providing an impressive view not only to the east, but also to the north and northeast. The owners, Leigh and John Middleton, are young, stylish, and vibrant, and I have tremendously enjoyed working for and getting to know them.

I was introduced to the Middletons by the architect Peter Zimmerman from Berwyn, Pennsylvania. We had worked together on a project a number of years previously, with great success. The Middletons also brought in Ellie Cullman, the brilliant interior designer of Cullman & Kravis, New York, and we all cooperated to interpret the thoughts and expressions of our clients. Leigh and John each wished to make sure that the other would like and enjoy the property: John always called it "Leigh's House," and Leigh always wanted it to be to John's liking.

As with most good projects, the plan developed quickly. The main and service entrances were placed at the two extreme ends of the property, in order to keep as much space open in the center as possible. We used the elevation change to our advantage, designing an upper and a lower garden and making the most of the exceptional ocean view. The code legality of certain elements of the design was questioned by some, but it all worked out. I have to say that building codes—not just in Palm Beach, but everywhere—are for the most part tragic for good architecture. We were able to work within these limitations, although it is never easy.

Living directly on the ocean in Florida, north of Key Biscayne, is a horticultural nightmare. The winds start to pick up in late October

and ravage the coast sporadically until March, devastating anything in sight. Even the hardiest plants are damaged during their first year in situ, so the choice is very limited. The ocean in Florida is most beautiful from Lost Tree Village to Miami Beach. South of there, the sand flats protect the environment, but the water is just not the same. To the north, the Gulf Stream is farther from the coast, so the color of the water is not as consistent as it is in Palm Beach, where the Gulf Stream is closer than it is anywhere else in the country.

The most wonderful characteristic of this assignment is how the garden constantly changes in response to the ocean, the time of year, and the variety of plants. Nature becomes spectacular when one does not try to conquer her; one must instead try to work with the material inclinations and characteristics of plants.

When one walks into the house, the talents of Peter and Ellie become obvious. It takes special skill to create perfect proportion and scale in architecture. We work with many architects, and only about one in ten has this inherent knowledge of balance and design. Peter definitely has it. In terms of proportion, the house is perfect: the rooms flow into one another with grace and light. Ellie has decorated them with great style, exquisite detail, and expert choice of materials.

One major factor for us was the building contractor, Marker Construction Group. Without Grey Marker and his exacting attention to detail, our concepts would have never been carried out correctly. Equally important was Colin Goldsmith of Botanica Landscaping, who was able to make our wishes reality. Any necessary changes were done without question. For this job—as with any project—coordination was essential.

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## THE FRONT DRIVE

A row of *Podocarpus* divides the property from the street, punctuated at each end by large sea grape trees [*Coccoloba uvifera*], which mark the main and service entrances. With the pair of sea grape trees, two large piers mark the main driveway. They are made of rusticated limestone and topped with large zinc agave finials that appear in various sizes throughout the garden. The simple bronze gates are of a transparent design that is also repeated elsewhere in the garden. The driveway, of smooth river stones with a concave coquina border, leads through a tunnel of sea grape trees, underplanted with tropical plants of many different sizes.

Next to the driveway, facing away from it and into the garden, is the first of two slat houses that were designed principally to hide all the mechanical equipment that would otherwise litter the garden. Approximately two-thirds of each slat house is for equipment; the other third is for orchids. One side facing the garden

is a mirrored latticed wall that tricks the eye into seeing a full greenhouse. After having to deal with mechanical litter in so many garden projects, we now look for ways to disguise equipment as effectively and as early as possible.

The driveway climbs quickly up to the motor court, where—as in so many of our gardens—the shaded driveway gives way to full sunlight. Straight on through the elliptical court, between a pair of tall pilasters, is a framed view of the ocean.

The motor court is broad and sunny, paved with grass-edged coquina stone. At its center is a mosaic of river stones forming a ribbon design. To the right is a walkway bordered with a billowy hedge of *Carmona microphylla*, in which a wooden gate, designed with a partial opening to allow a peek through, leads to the upper garden. The path runs between the front door and the three-tiered fountain, the upper tier of which is aligned with the door, giving a focal point to the walkway.



The entrance and (pages 42–43) the motor court, surrounded by *Bismarckia nobilis* palms.





*The low, billowing hedges beside the motor court (above) are of clipped Carmona.*







## THE SEASIDE GARDEN

This is accessed from various points, and the views of it from the house are broad and ample. Because the property sits so high, the views of the ocean are spectacular. Coconut palms (*Cocos nucifera*)—nothing else—punctuate the lawn, and this wonderful simplicity accentuates the beauty of the ever-changing ocean. The land juts out on the right-hand side, where we designed a round swimming pool in large slabs of coquina stone, giving it a soft tone that picks up the light beautifully. The pool is surrounded by more coconut palms, for a tropical feel. The outlook in all directions from this spot is unique: there is nowhere else in town with such a view as here. Near the beach, a languid hammock hangs between a pair of coconuts, and two bronze crocodiles shoot water into the pool from the lawn.

On the southern side of the house we placed a fountain spa. I have never liked spas, since invariably they end up abandoned in the garden, always looking like a spa. We try to make them into garden elements, and this one we designed as a fountain that is visible from private areas of the house. It is flanked by a pair of fire pits that we had made out of large, round coquina blocks. A nineteenth-century lead figure of a boy holding a fish is perfect here. The fish spits on to a stone shell that we had carved, and adds water to the spa.



*The fountain spa (opposite) is flanked by fire pits. Amphitheater-like steps and statuary give a classical feel to this corner of the garden.*





## THE GUEST ROOM GARDEN

This garden is at second-floor level, covering the breezeway that connects the main house with the guest room and the garage below. Visitors to the house love the idea of a fountain on the second floor. It has small water jets and in the center a wonderful sculpture of bronze water lilies by the artist Geoffrey Smith of Stuart, Florida. It is all very unexpected and rather playful. The fountain is lined with small river stones, and the terrace with loose mother-of-pearl shells. The planting is salt-tolerant, because this part of the garden has a side exposure to the brutal winds: tough *Ficus microcarpa* "Green Island," *Neomarica caerulea*, *Bulbine frutescens*, *Trimezia martinicensis*, *Pennisetum setaceum* "Rubrum," and *Thunbergia grandiflora* "Alba." The space is balanced with stone benches and vases d'Anduze. It is a relaxing space for anyone to enjoy at any time.





A regal palm, *Phoenix dactylifera*, spreads its leaves over the water-lily pond (opposite) and a secluded seat (left). The terra-cotta pots contain *Echeveria* succulents and the giant Mexican lily, *Furcraea foetida*.



## THE UPPER GARDEN

The western side of the house opens to the Upper Garden, which is best accessed from the dining-room terrace or the loggia. Three Moreton Bay figs (*Ficus macrophylla*) are planted close together in the center. These are unusual trees for Florida; the first time I saw one was when I went to a board meeting of the National Tropical Botanical Garden in Kauai, Hawaii. There are spectacular ones there. This tree takes you into a Jurassic Park environment, and it's easy to see why parts of that movie were filmed there.

We tracked these specimens down in two different spots close to the ocean in Melbourne, Florida, after a very long search by the palm-tree broker and seed collector Sean Jacobus. It was a great find. They are now underplanted thickly with delicately colored Australian violets (*Viola banksii*). The flowers grow together very low to the ground, but the marvelous root systems of these special trees can still be seen.

This space is rigidly confined by the house on two sides and by *Podocarpus*

hedges on the other two. Directly opposite the main part of the house, the hedge is broadly open, anchored by a pair of French stone pilasters and bird baths. Beyond, two long stone risers lead up to a grassed platform with a pergola. This pergola is flanked by two very large terra-cotta pots full of annuals and surrounded with a bronze railing of the same design as the front gates, a transparent, undulating ribbon. From here on it is all about the view, so the railing had to be as unobtrusive as possible.

Chunky pilasters support the pergola.

The view from the pergola is to the west and is very broad; it is the perfect place from which to watch the sunset. Once under the pergola, the big surprise is the courtyard below, the West Pool (see page 74). Taking advantage of the change in elevation, we designed the ground to drop at this point. The pool area is very secluded from the rest of the property. Since it is on the leeward side, it is also well protected from the nasty winds that prevail in Palm Beach during the winter.







*The West Terrace (opposite) is a focus for the glowing evening sun. Off it is the shady West Loggia (right), with its shell fountain.*





## THE TIERED FOUNTAIN

The change in grade between the Upper Garden and the West Pool was too much for a single staircase: it would have been uncomfortable to look at or to use. My colleague Brian Vertesch and I then thought of dividing the space into more than one staircase, punctuated by fountains. This gave us the scope to create an upper fountain, a middle fountain, and a lower fountain.

The walkway that leads from the front door to the upper fountain was created with a graceful terminus when seen from the doorway, and also to be enticing, to encourage exploration. We designed the bronze lotus fountainhead with Geoffrey Smith. The double stairs wind gracefully around this fountain bowl down to the middle fountain.

The middle fountain is rounded, flanked with white marble benches. In the center is a controllable plume of water that can leap as high as 10 feet in the air. It can be seen from the front door, and is fascinating to small children. The upper fountain spills through the mask of a dolphin on to a shell, and then into a small basin. The water continues through the center jet of water on to another dolphin mask, which also shoots water into the lower pool. At the end, a small belvedere looks over the courtyard, flanked by another pair of rounded stairs.

These last steps end at the edge of the courtyard with a rounded pool containing water lilies and papyrus (*Cyperus papyrus*). It appears to receive water from the dolphin mask above it, although this is in fact achieved through sleight of hand, since the saltwater filter that is used in the water above cannot be used for the planted pool. The trick is to divert the water from above and to use a different source for the lowest pool.

There is a lot to this graduated fountain, but I feel we did it right. It is both practical—the division of fresh from chlorinated water was no mean feat, but it allows the plants to thrive—and unique.







*Geoffrey Smith's bronze lotus sculpture (opposite) is a stunning centerpiece for the top of the tiered fountains. The height of the middle jet (right) can be altered.*





## THE WEST POOL

Beatrix Farrand had a strong influence on my education as a gardener. Her designs were always exceptional, and I feel that her philosophy on gardening was very close to mine—that is to say, mine derives from her ideas. What we created at Turtle Bluff has the flavor of her garden at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC, with a bit of Florida mixed in.

At first, Leigh Middleton was thinking about a tennis court. I have a long love/hate relationship with tennis courts, which I believe are wonderful in two instances: for tennis fanatics or on very large properties. Period. They have a

depressing tendency to end up in a semi-abandoned state after a few years, and that is why I've always made a point of discouraging my clients from having them. Tennis is a social sport, and I believe that's what clubs were made for.

It took a while to dissuade Leigh, but John supported me all along. She was finally convinced by the thought of future grandchildren having a place to play. Done! The pool was in, but now we needed to come up with a concept that would be both elegant and practical. A beach entrance to the pool was in Leigh's

mind, and that is where the thought of an old carriage or horse bath came into play. Having the beach entry at both ends, with a deep area between, gave us all the elements we needed. Coquina was used for this swimming pool, too, giving it a "quarried" look.

The loggia was finished with coquina, to match the rest of the area. At first the interior was to be more grotto-like, lined with designs formed from shells and small stones, but Ellie introduced an English artist for the shell pattern, and it developed into something spectacular. We have used shell designs in other

gardens, but the workmanship of this one is amazing.

The pool courtyard is symmetrical, and its walls are lined with small coquina stones, giving it a traditional southern Mediterranean look. On each side a slat house opens up into the space, and mountains of fragrant plants—gardenias, citrus and cananga trees (*Cananga odorata*)—scent both day and evening.

At first, Leigh and John thought they would live in this house for a couple of months of the year. I have a feeling that it is a property they will be using more and more.





*Lemon trees grow—and fruit—happily  
in the balmy climate of Palm Beach.  
Orchids are given their own houses,  
which also contain concealed storage.*



The intricate shellwork in the pool house is full of detail and shimmering, pearlescent color.



