



TRÈS BELLE

A FRENCH-STYLE GARDEN exudes a resplendent JOIE DE VIVRE

INTERVIEW WITH ROB WILBER,
WILBER & KING | PHOTOGRAPHER
STACY BASS

(photographs p.83 + 92 by neil landino)



For a distinctly French look, Wilber opted to forgo foundation plantings and designed the native gravel driveway with Phoenicia Buff runner and curbing to lead directly to the front door. In the back, a cross-patterned courtyard connects the garden spaces.



“The **BEST THING** that can happen to me is when people pull up and say, ‘Wow, this is **VERY FRENCH.**’”

—ROB WILBER

How long have you known these clients? I met them thirty years ago. I designed and implemented the landscape for their first house, then their second house and now this house. They’ve always liked a garden with a French feel to it, with some formality but still like a country French chateau, and I’ve been able to deliver that for them. They’ve done this for all three of their gardens.

What did this landscape look like before? It’s a waterfront property on Long Island Sound, with views of the New York City skyline, on a long, skinny lot. It’s very narrow—I would say it’s five times as long as it is wide.

Did that present any challenges? It did in trying to maximize the views. The house was new construction, and I was involved from the very beginning in the placement of the house. The location of the house was important, and how the house was built, so that you could get views of the water and then go outside into the garden and see beautiful views in a way that didn’t make you feel like you were in a tunnel. We wanted to expand the gardens out as wide as possible. Rather than looking at the narrowness of the property as a problem, we looked at it as an opportunity.

I love the approach to the home—it’s so unique. We did a very formal oval hedgerow around the driveway for their last property, which matured and looked beautiful. We wanted to do something similar here, so we decided to have no landscaping in the front. We had the gravel driveway and pavement pattern go right up to the front door with this very straight line of linden trees, all pruned in squares. We designed the driveway, picked out the stone and installed it with the ribbon and medallions that we did for drainage, which is very French and has a European feel. From the road, you see that center line go right up to the front door, and on a sunny day, you can see right through the house and view the water from the street. The driveway is really telling the story here. If you go to old French chateaus in France and villas in Italy, that’s what you see—it’s very clean and goes up to the foundation of the house, which is very different than other houses around here.

How did the architecture of the home factor into the landscape design? They worked in concert. In the beginning, we worked with the architect, Doug VanderHorn, on the placement of the house and siting it on the lot. Throughout the process, we could see how the architecture of the home was developing, and because of the narrowness of the property, we had a feel that we were definitely going for in regards to the landscape. We designed and implemented all of the patio work and the outside stone-work. As design patterns for the house developed, that then determined



A sunken patio on the right offers privacy for a hot tub and adds another dimension to the level property. Existing mature trees near the water were incorporated into the new landscape.





PHOTOGRAPH BY NEIL LANCINO



this spread: A formal knot garden, sculpted from Korean boxwood, American boxwood and 'Morris Midget' boxwood, is a visual delight from the screened-in porch and veranda.

the materials selection on our part. Once they chose the brick and limestone combination for the house, we incorporated patterns in our pavement pattern to match. There was a lot of wood in one part of the house called the “barn,” so we wanted to get some of those “timber” feelings in the landscape somehow. That’s why we did an allée of wooden obelisks on the other side and balanced all the wood with the arbor built into the house. The architecture of the home is stunning, and I think the gardens go very well with it.

The network of crisscrossing paths in the back is very striking.

The plan, in formal French gardens, plays a lot with geometric patterns. It’s done with grass and gravel paths and/or very strict, defined hedgerows that have that geometric pattern to them. We did that in their last house,

and we decided here to just do gravel and grass. It’s fairly simple, and it brings the theme of the gravel driveway going right up to the house and carries it through to the back. The paths line up well with the visual aspects of the house and the ways in which you enter the garden from the house, the screened-in porch and the patio.

One destination is the knot garden—what was the thought behind this?

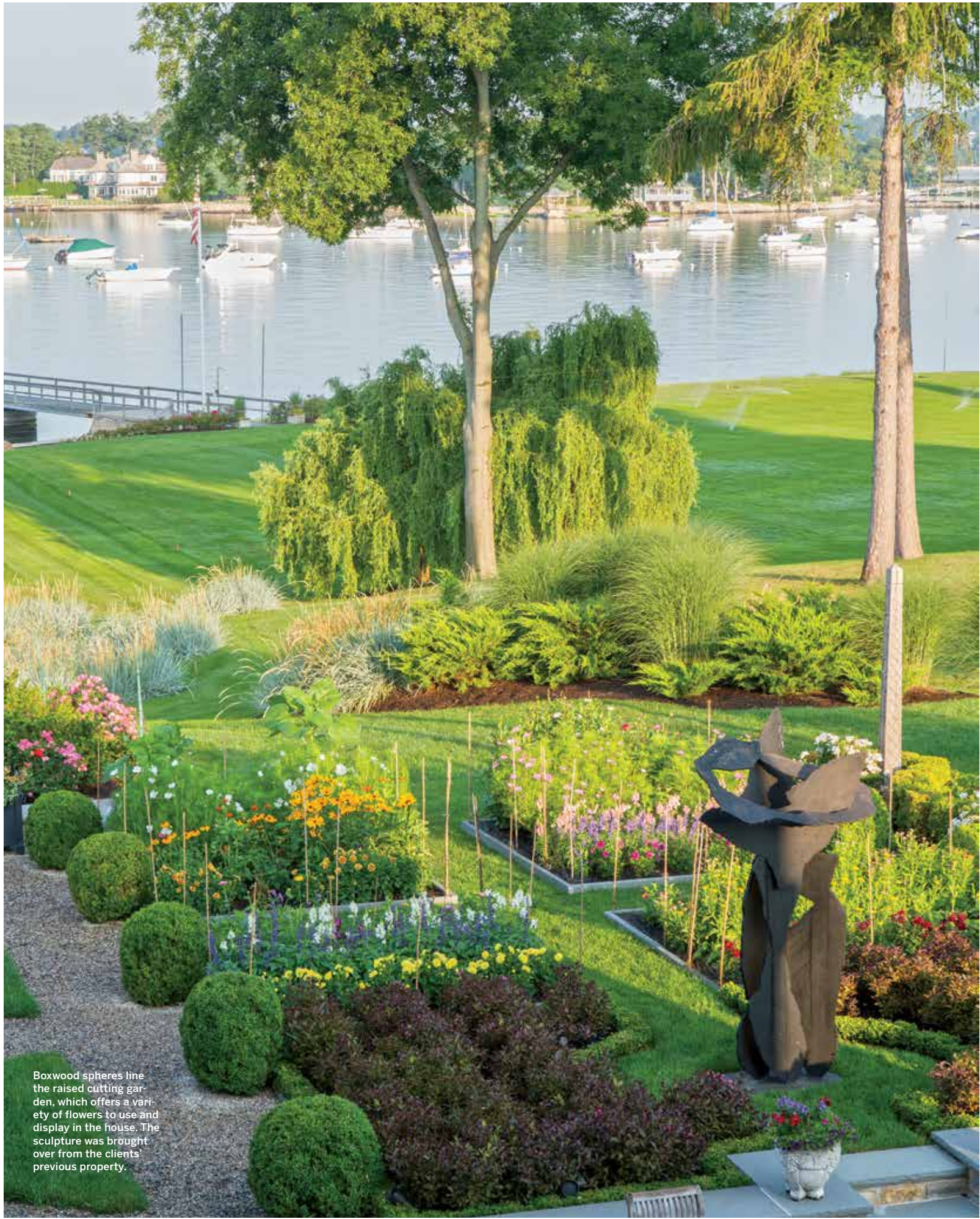
The point was to bring the formality of a knot garden together with the informality of being a country estate. It’s a little bit more free-form, but it’s a true knot garden, where the plants go under one another, or appear to go under one another, and form knots and cross over. This actually has a third dimension to it, going underneath and on top and swirling, which is fun. It takes a bit more work to maintain, but in the end, it’s a true knot

“We wanted to **EXPAND** the gardens
out as **WIDE AS POSSIBLE.**”

—ROB WILBER

Modeled after directional
road signs, the custom
locust wood obelisks
were designed and made
by Wilber & King.





Boxwood spheres line the raised cutting garden, which offers a variety of flowers to use and display in the house. The sculpture was brought over from the clients' previous property.



Bursts of colorful blooms enhance the various shades of green found throughout the garden rooms. Every angle on the property offers a pleasing sight and enchanting points of interest.





The various garden spaces frame views of the water and the harbor, and Long Island and New York City can be glimpsed in the distance as well.



above: A bluestone patio centered around a limestone gas fire pit offers both relaxation and sightseeing opportunities; bright Cosmos flowers adorn the landscape; boxwoods in the obelisk garden form a serpentine aisle down to the water. **opposite:** Drifts of blue lyme grass dot the conservation area. "The drifts have a Scottish feel, like you're in the Scottish Highlands, with clumps of grass and heather," Wilber says.

garden, not a formal French garden, which we had in their other gardens; we just wanted to do something different. The informality of it is nice because we knew it would be strictly visual from the screened-in porch, and it worked out well.

The seating area at the end of the gravel paths must provide great views. The clients wanted a fire pit area where they could get away from the house and enjoy the view up the harbor toward the yacht club as well as of New York City. You can see Long Island very well from there as well. There's a whole bed of pink 'Knockout' roses there that will eventually become one big buffer of flowers.

How do the defined gardens opposite the patio relate to each other? The first one was to again get that French feeling—we used 'Wine and Roses' weigela to play up the foliage factor. That bed is heavy on color and helps balance out the heaviness of the barn and brick on the left. It's striking color-wise and keeps the center line focused on the center line of the lawn, and the sculpture is something we moved over from their other

house. Next is a true cutting garden with an array of flowers used year-round in the house. That's getting into the informality of it, since there's formality with the cross pattern of the grass paths and the dark foliage of the weigela.

What are the plans for the obelisk garden? Eventually there will be roses coming up through and in between the obelisks to create a bit of privacy. We didn't want a fence or hedge on the property, but we did want to break it up a bit, so it was about having these fingers of climbing roses working up. It's going to take a few years. The serpentine line of this garden softens the straightness of it all and incorporates the feel of the boxwood. It was meant to deformalize the formality of it, if that makes sense!

How did you create a transition down to the water? This is a conservation area, and it gets flooded with saltwater. The blue lyme grass is very tolerant of being soaked, so that was a major grass we used down there, and we slowly naturalized it up the hill a little bit to add color. The area isn't formal at all; it's sort of these drifts and as naturalistic as possible, and

“They like a garden with
a French feel to it,
with **SOME FORMALITY** but still
like a **COUNTRY**
French chateau.”

—ROB WILBER



The landscape design and the architecture of the home work in harmony to create a true French look and feel.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NEIL LANDING

that’s what we were required to do. Would we have done that normally? Probably not. So it was a transition zone between the conservation area and the formality of the garden.

Overall, what planting palette did you use? What drove the decisions were the type of plantings that you could prune and shape into certain shapes, ones that would still, long-term, give you that European feel. In the front of the house, we have just beds of lavender—that’s a very, very French thing to do. In the springtime when you go by, you really do think you’re seeing a French chateau—it’s the lavender, the stone of the driveway going up to the front, the square pruned trees.

And how fortunate that the distant views work so seamlessly with what you’ve done here. The clients’ old home is actually the big stone house next door. Because they bought the property next door, we were able to change some of the planting on their old property to help with this new property, and vice versa, to make sure that their old property was screened off from the new house. It was beneficial for everyone, and everyone got their privacy.

Any obstacles you needed to overcome? Since the property is so narrow, you need tall, skinnier trees on the property line, with the drawback being that you have this row of “soldiers” going straight down. Fortunately, the detached garage and the generator shed on the right helped break that up and allowed us to plant a few larger plants along the property line. It was a challenge to get that to happen, to get the placement of the house and the garage right so that you could do that and not have this long tunnel.

Given your history with the clients, did they give you free reign? They definitely let me go a bit. I think they’re very happy with it, and they get a lot of compliments. The best thing that can happen to me is when people pull up and say, “Wow, this is very French.” That means we achieved our goal. When you drive down the road, every house has this New England landscape feel to it, and this one is so different; it’s not the typical stone wall in the front. You can see trees lining driveways everywhere, but the fact that they’re pruned in squares, there’s no foundation planting, the rows of lavender—it’s just so different.

Do you have a favorite feature? I’m a big fan of the driveway. How many times have you been in Europe, walking down the street, and you see that? It makes it so a very simple part of a street or parking area there is beautiful. A driveway can be beautiful. —INTERVIEW BY LAUREN FETTERMAN

Resources:
Landscape designer: Wilber & King, Stony Creek; 203-488-0201; wilberandking.com
Residence architect: Douglas VanderHorn Architects, Greenwich; 203-622-7000; vanderhornarchitects.com
General contractor: Significant Homes, LLC, New Canaan; 203-966-5700; significanthomesllc.com