



From left: landscape designers Michael Madarash, Jeff Mendoza, Ani Antreasyan and David Protell photographed at the Chelsea Garden Center's new location on 11th Avenue and 44th Street. Photography by Andrew French, styling by Kathy Kalafut.



*Michael Madarash used trumpet honeysuckle and a custom-built cedar pergola to transform a 1,100-square-foot rooftop into an urban oasis in Manhattan's West Village.*



# THE POETIC LANDSCAPE

A LOOK AT HOW A FEW OF NEW YORK'S TOP LANDSCAPE DESIGNERS MARRY INSPIRATION WITH TECHNIQUE

BY GERIT QUEALY

Billy Collins, America's Poet Laureate from 2001-2003, seems to relish pointing out that the Romantic poets killed off humor and sex in favor of landscape. His resolve: "I'm trying to write about humor and landscape, and occasionally sex." So, while Lancelot "Capability" Brown, the 19th-century superstar landscape designer, might be taken aback by some of today's whimsical garden creations, Collins might find a kindred spirit among a number of contemporary landscape designers' insouciant compositions and sensuous combinations. As with any art, be it iambic or arboreal, there must be a certain symmetry and structure that forms the backbone of creative inspiration in order for it to take shape. The designers we've chosen know this all the way down to their green thumbs, even if they've taken very different paths to arrive at their signature flourish.





On the 16th floor of a building on Central Park South, Jeff Mendoza created a tranquil moss garden with low juniper planted along the parapet to echo the tree canopy of the park in the distance.

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Case in point: Jeff Mendoza. Samuel Taylor Coleridge himself, author of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, might find manifold delights in Mendoza's octopus garden, even if its inspiration sprang from the Beatles song rather than creatures of the deep. But, Mendoza explains, the client also liked the nautical element and its resonance with Sag Harbor's seafaring history. The octopus herb garden, along with its sibling gardens (perennial, pool and woodland gardens) on the complex Hampton property, was one of the earliest projects for the New York City-based landscape designer, so it holds a special place in his heart. He's been taking care of it for nearly 20 years. But his original artistic vernacular was sculpture. "I trained at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago," he says, but after graduation, "I needed a job to support the studio."

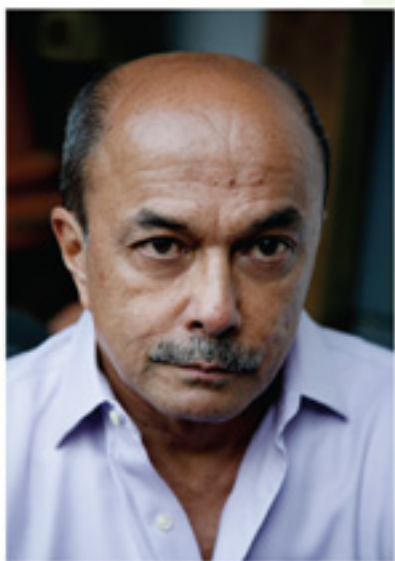
A friend with a landscape business enlisted his help and the transition was virtually seamless. In the studio, he had been working with "trees and limbs and leaves, but they were a kind of metaphor for the real world." Moving to actually working in the real world brought up the issue of materials: living things as opposed to stone.

"I've always been interested in plants, and of course, dealing with the landscape is on some level extremely painterly and very sculptural. You have to deal with the manipulation of plants in space," he explains.

The intellectual challenge of learning about the plants became an added stimulus. "It's one of the more gratifying things about the work," says Mendoza. "A completely different language. And it's science. That's really interesting to me."

It is his particular integration of these two "languages" that has established his reputation. The sculptural qualities of the many rooftop gardens and terraces he has created have garnered international renown, such as a Kyoto garden-inspired rectangle of imported Japanese river stones with a geometric ripple of grass and Mexican beach stone borders, punctuated by ornamental grasses and a weeping pine. "City terraces are more about a kind of fantasy, because there are gardens where they really don't belong," he says. "Part of that shock is like theatre. You look out the window and say, 'Oh my God, here's a Japanese garden on the 18th floor of this building.' It's almost like a proscenium that you experience from the inside as well."

Theatricality aside, Mendoza views his various projects, whether it be a New York terrace or a Hampton estate, like his children. Unlike other art forms, a garden is a living art, always evolving, so it takes a special, often lifelong, commitment. Ironically, "the long-term evolution of the garden and the space as the plants and trees mature" is what he finds most satisfying — like a sculpture that is never quite finished.





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Ani Antreasyan wasn't trained to carve stone, but she's always had an extraordinary fascination with it. And, intractable as it is, it has been her springboard into landscape design. In fact, for her, the two are inextricably linked. As a Turkish Armenian growing up in Istanbul, she remembers touring castles with her family and staying outside to play in the gardens, amongst the statuary. "I've always wrapped myself around old stone," she laughs. That penchant was coupled with a love for gardens themselves.

"I've gardened since I was able to walk," she says, describing her family's two-acre garden of herbs and flowers, fruits and vegetables. "We had a gardener who really cared about them and I was his little assistant."

Yet all that lay dormant while Antreasyan toiled for 10 years at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the layout of their retail shop, and then into the exhibition design and photo departments. But after a decade, her childhood passions resurfaced and she left to open Canyon Antiques (renamed Ani Ancient Stone) on the Upper East Side, and began filling it with old stone pieces, especially ones for outdoor use.

She recalled trips with her parents to excavations all over Turkey, and seeing a lot of antique stone being unearthed. It's there, she says, that "I learned to tell the difference between stone and the age of it." So she returned to the familiar, "I started buying in

Turkey, then after I learned the market, I started traveling in Europe." Now there's no stopping her. "I buy wherever I go." But today her sprees are fueled as much by her clients' desires as her own.

The move into garden design happened incrementally — after a client chose a piece, she would go and install it for them, creating little niches and vignettes. This led to an invitation to design a terrace for the Kips Bay Show House in 2000, and her client list has grown steadily ever since.

Another show house just last year for the American Hospital in Paris Foundation highlights her inventiveness. The terrace was long and narrow — so she made it even narrower. "When you looked out, you saw a tunnel of beautiful green trees, and at the end of the tunnel, a fountain and the female sculpture. The two little benches made it sort of like a miniature European park."

Antreasyan's years of experience with retail design and especially photography at the Met have funneled into her aesthetic approach as well. She tends to see compositions with a photographic precision. Witness the stone greyhounds she found in England flanking an 18th-century Turkish barn door, which served to integrate the existing elements of the landscape. "I do layout and style the way a photographer thinks about shooting and cropping," she explains. Another signature is a minimal color palette of icy blues and lavenders, so the stone remains the focal point. "I use a lot of Mediterranean foliage, and I plant big amounts of lavender." She feels this is one of the reasons clients seek her out. "I'm very opinionated and everybody likes that."



When clients asked for "something different" than a typical Hamptons-style landscape design, Ani Antreasyan brought her contemporary design style and love of Mediterranean plants to the project. The design features lavender, boxwood, bamboo and an inviting path that is a stylized version of a bamboo stalk.



# MICHAEL MADARASH KOKOBO PLANTSCAPES

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Michael Madarash may very well have chlorophyll in his veins. The Long Island native began gardening when he was proverbially "knee-high to a grasshopper." "My grandfather worked for the Nassau County Parks Department, so at an early age I would go with him to work and help tend the beds and plant flowers," he remembers. And though his father was not employed as a gardener, it was clearly his life's work. Weekends spent hiking in the country were hunt-and-gather expeditions for their Suffolk County property. "We'd bring home little saplings and plant wild flowers. And you know, 20 years later, it's a gorgeous, gorgeous property."

Madarash's enthusiasm is palpable. That enthusiasm ignited an entrepreneurial spirit that has served him well. "By the time I was 18, I had a small company with three of my friends working for me; we had a little lawn route in the town." But he was determined to have his hands-on experience balanced with education, so he enrolled at UMass specifically to attend the Stockbridge School of Agriculture, one of the best in the country. Summers were spent interning at landscape companies and a Philadelphia golf course, which played into an aspect of his present business, maintaining the landscapes of large hotel properties. "A lot of what I learned at that golf club comes into play in terms of trying to keep everything perfect."

During the semesters, he started a company that landscaped the sorority houses on campus. Very smart. Because that's how he met his wife, who was integral to the naming of his current company. KokoBo combines Kokopelli, the ancient Indian figure representing truth, hard work and mischief with Bo, a version of his wife's nickname.

With this panoply of experience and seemingly boundless energy, the 29-year-old has made KokoBo Plantscapes an award-winning landscape design business that covers properties large and small all over New York and Long Island. Yet, his favorite projects tend to be contained spaces like the West Village rooftop he designed early on. "I love urban landscapes, and the challenge of figuring out the logistics of getting things through tight spaces; taking a tiny area and expanding it and trying to incorporate all these elements without it becoming overcrowded."

One challenge involved installing a drip irrigation system, a topic that was barely glanced upon in school. During the consultation on his first rooftop, the client was adamant about no sprinklers, "and I thought, how is that going to work?" says Madarash. But it worked so well that "now it's really all we do."

Another issue is his commitment to sustainable landscapes and environmental improvement. "With global warming, the cost of energy, plus the health benefits, to be able to recycle and enjoy areas that we couldn't before is so important."

Madarash has even become a bit of a TV personality, appearing on HGTV's *Landscape's Challenge* and last year's *Urban Outsiders* where he and his team designed and installed seven "ridiculously gorgeous gardens" in 30 days. "It was really crazy. We worked for 30 days straight, 14-hour days, sometimes in the rain. It was really crazy." Although he credits it as an amazing experience, he's not sure they'd do it again.

Looking to the future, his younger brother is studying environmental design at SUNY Binghamton, so the plan is to bring him in after graduation as he has his father, now VP of KokoBo, creating a nice symmetry with his roots — gardening as a family affair.



For a water feature in this Brooklyn backyard, Michael Madarash incorporated laceleaf Japanese maple, *Spirea Goldmound*, various perennials and driftwood found on the beach in Montauk. The waterfall is built with moss rock, Pennsylvania fieldstone and smooth river rock Madarash sourced while on a fishing trip in upstate New York.



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To a certain degree, David Protell could be credited with making Chelsea bloom. There's no doubt that the Chelsea Garden Center, now in its eighth incarnation, has had a profound impact on the city's greenscape. The myriad moves, the latest to 11th Avenue and 44th Street (with its first adjunct in Brooklyn), have prompted the CGC president to call it the Gypsy Garden Center on a number of occasions, a rueful acknowledgment of the city's ever-demanding real estate market forcing the establishment to pull up roots and relocate every few years. But nearly every time it has landed in a new location, it's been bigger and better.

A far cry from its humble beginnings on the corner of 23rd Street and 10 Avenue in 1984, Protell describes Chelsea as a ghost town then. "On the south side of 23rd Street between 9th and 10th, all these brownstones were boarded up and in decay." But, there happened to be a lil' store down the block called Pottery Barn and their full-page sale ads in the New York Times drew people to the neighborhood, and to the little garden design store on the corner. "It just mushroomed from there." Yes, it did.

In fact, it was another happy accident that landed Protell in the landscape business in the first place. Protell's father, an oral surgeon, insisted his son do some manual labor before college, so Protell got a job with the New Jersey Department of Highways, Shade Tree Division, which proved an unusual source of inspiration. "The Dutchman who ran that division was an accomplished artist, and a master gardener with a picture-perfect cottage garden," he remembers. "What we were planting back in the late '60s in the rotaries of the townships was amazing."

This piqued his interest, as did the more technical side. "I was also coming out of my jock phase, and I built a Little League field with these guys as well. I got to see the landscape construction side of it, the geometry in the field, different materials, the drainage, the construction, the layout, the types of grass, the type of clay, the elevations for the pitching mound, the measurements involved — very interesting."

He attended UMass for the horticulture program, but is quick to point out that in the 1970s gardening as a prime hobby wasn't even on the map. Settling at the first Chelsea location was really a sort of home base. "We were using the facility as a depot for the work. We were doing terrace and rooftop gardens," Protell explains. "We really backed into the retail business."

But now the Chelsea Garden Center is front and center of New York's landscape industry and Protell is clearly proud of how they've grown. "We've designed 1,800-square-foot Japanese gardens in the street on Rockefeller Place. We've designed penthouses in the sky that we crane trees into. We've built ball fields, the Battery Park City soccer field. We've planted tens of thousands of grasses and worked for any number of different architects. From lap pools on rooftops to dog runs on penthouses and rose gardens for Bette Midler. What we do here in New York is unique."

Now at its new location, a verdant oasis on the otherwise treeless 11th Avenue approach to the Lincoln Tunnel, the CGC seems more a permanent fixture in the city's collective mind than a fixed spot in its landscape. Notes Protell, "What's amazing is people have followed us to every one of our locations and our clientele continues to build. And you know what that's about? That's about gardening."



David Protell's design for this penthouse-level corner nook in Manhattan is framed with topiary trees, furnished with all-weather casual seating and brightened by vibrant fall mums.

Gerit Quealy, a NYC-based journalist, writes on a variety of cultural concerns, including horticulture.