

Layers can create gardening pleasure, beauty

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By Martha Swiss /

Every artist has a medium, and the gardener's medium is plants.

Just like a fine painting often has layers of paint, gardens can be made in layers too, according to David L. Culp, garden designer, teacher and author. He will be speaking on the subject, as well as his renowned Brandywine Cottage in Downingtown, Pa., on Thursday at Phipps Conservatory in Oakland

Brandywine Cottage, a 2-acre garden that he and his partner, Michael Alderfer, have created over the past 20 years, is included in the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Gardens and is regularly highlighted by Martha Stewart Living and HGTV.

Mr. Culp has been writing and lecturing nationally for more than 15 years, with articles in Martha Stewart Living, Country Living, and Fine Gardening magazines. He is a former contributing editor for Horticulture magazine and teaches courses at Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, near Philadelphia. His vast knowledge of snowdrops was featured in the Wall Street Journal, and he has developed the 'Brandywine' hybrid strain of hellebores. Currently vice president of Sunny Border Nurseries, Mr. Culp received the Distinguished Garden Award and an Award of Merit from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.

His new book, "The Layered Garden: Design Lessons for Year-Round Beauty From Brandywine Cottage" (Timber Press), captures his approach to creating gardens and lessons learned as a lifelong gardener.

"The layered garden approach is basically about how much pleasure you can wring out of one spot," he says.

His design sensibilities enliven well-worn concepts like four-season interest and use of textures and colors.

"The layered garden is about using a variety of plants and taking advantage of how they live, grow, and even die. To promote different feelings

and emotions in the garden, and how that varies from time to time."

He advises that the layering extends beyond the plant combinations themselves.

"It's about combinations of borders, how borders work together within the framework of the overall garden, and how the overall garden relates to the larger landscape. That's another layer.

"There's an emotional layer to the garden as well: how we react to it."

By involving ourselves daily in our gardens, we can see how plants change through the seasons. He urges us to constantly seek the beauty and inspiration that are always in our gardens waiting for us to enjoy.

"There is interest as plants die. The red fall foliage of *Hydrangea quercifolia* with hostas underneath that are going to turn yellow. For a couple weeks, you have a beautiful combination based on senescing foliage. Or you can use a witchhazel and underplant it with a *Geranium macrorrhizum* or an amsonia in the distance," he suggests.

The vignettes may be fleeting: "Peony buds coming out of the ground underplanted with a bulb or a spring ephemeral. You are using that moment for a combination. Every little moment is fair game.

"You just have to expand your mind a little, looking at the garden differently, looking at the realm of possibilities. Seeing things in many different layers, different perspectives all the time, looking close."

There is an economy in his approach. "It's using that same peony in the spring as it emerges and the same thing with the seed pods in the fall. It's that Pennsylvania Dutch practicality. Use it up. You're just using the plant."

This sensibility and his love of gardening were instilled at an early age by his parents and both sets of grandparents. "I always gardened. I was no more than 5 years old when I first heard the 'Jack and the Beanstalk' story, which inspired me to plant bean seeds in paper cups so that, like Jack, I could climb my vine into the sky."

He was undeterred by childhood gardening flops -- planting pumpkin seeds after Halloween in a Dutch Masters cigar box, and planting pussy willows too close to his parents' house.

"A common denominator of all gardeners is the joy of watching something grow, and I have always enjoyed that."

His layered gardening technique fosters this interest in watching things grow. But how do we begin making layered gardens?

"First of all you have to want to do it," he stresses. "I usually say our gardens do not do it because we do not demand it of them. We just say, 'I

wish.' Well, that doesn't make it happen. You have to go out and say, 'This is what I have to do to make a winter interest garden,' or, 'I want it to look good in the fall,' so you ask that of your garden, make it happen."

"Whether it's a 2-acre garden like mine or a city garden, your house has four sides to it. So you could do each side as a different season of interest, sequencing. Try not to do everything at once. I try to have different peaks in the garden and different experiences as you walk through. Any garden can give you this experience if you just think about it. I don't think it's a matter of size. It's certainly not in my case a matter of money because I'm a gardener. I do this out of passion."

In addition to the book's stunning color photographs by renowned garden photographer Rob Cardillo, Mr. Culp has written "The Layered Garden" to inspire and instruct. In a conversational style, he shares triumphs, defeats, and ideas, such as one gardener would share with another.

"It's meant to be empowering, and it also gives practical advice on some of the plants that will help do that. If you follow the latter part of the book, it's done by each peak genus that I have through the seasons, giving you hints and tools to start with."

Brandywine Cottage is the canvas upon which the techniques in his book have been honed. There, he has dealt with deer and other challenges like planting under black walnut trees.

"I bought [the property] right when I saw it. It was really a matter of love at first sight. And like falling in love, you don't see the object of your affection's faults right away. I did not see all the poison ivy and multiflora roses. I just saw possibilities."

He offers his designer's thoughts, "When I saw the house, because of the hillside I saw the grade changes, and I thought I could do a series of different visual perspectives." Because of the age of the house (1790s) he went with a geometric design that was often used in that era, something he calls country formal.

"I am a collector so I needed something to give me unity. I knew where I was going right from the start. Sure I had a plan, but it was more like an outline. I filled in the spots as I went along," he adds.

The garden at Brandywine Cottage has changed over time, something he has embraced. "I had a little grassy meadow on the top of the hill, and I started planting some trees around. I love those old meadows with the cedars coming out of them, like they're going back to what they were. Now after 20 years those trees have come full cycle, and they are wonderful, magnificent magnolia trees. And with other shade trees around, it's become a shade border."

Mr. Culp's program, which is sponsored by Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens and Penn State Extension, will run from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and include three parts -- the layered garden, natives and shade gardening.

Now in his early 60s, Mr. Culp said his garden has made him more reflective. "It's amazing where a love of gardening has taken me. It's a huge,

huge gift. I have met my favorite people through gardening. It's been the absolute best common denominator in my life.

"I'm still learning. I'm still amazed every day when I get up and go outside. Though I've been gardening here 20 years, I'm just always amazed at the beauty that the garden affords.

"The garden makes me appreciate the here and now and plan for the future even more. Never stop planning for the future but always appreciate what you have today."

The Summer Short Course featuring David Culp will run from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Thursday at Botany Hall, Phipps Conservatory. Cost is \$95 per person and includes lunch. Information, registration: 412-441-4442, ext. 3925 or <http://extension.psu.edu/allegheeny/events/>.

Martha Swiss is a Penn State master gardener. Columns by master gardeners sometimes appear in place of the Garden Q&A by Sandy Feather, a Penn State Extension educator.

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