



David L. Culp, author of "The Layered Garden," next to his vegetable garden at Brandywine Cottage. MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Staff Photographer

Layers of garden love

The roots of David L. Culp's planting passion go deep and spread wide at his Downingtown garden, all year round.

By Virginia A. Smith
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

David L. Culp has spent more than 20 years creating this magnificent garden in southern Chester County, ripping the bully-honeysuckle off a one-acre hillside by hand not just once, but three times, to avoid using chemical herbicides; hauling heavy rocks from here to there, again by hand, to build walls with indigenous stone; planting and replanting, doing and redoing, and endlessly weeding, all, naturally, by hand.

You'd think his hands would be a mess, which they are not, despite the fact that he wears gloves only when removing poison ivy. And you'd think he'd want to slow down.

Obviously, you don't know this guy.

"I'll never be done with it," Culp says, without a hint of resignation, for he understands what only the horticulturally hard-core do: A garden is never done, except on hyperactive HGTV, where, ironically, he was once a guest.

Culp, with decades of gardening behind him, actually sounds joyful about the prospect of working his back and arms and knees until he can't anymore, even joking, "If I retire, what would I do — garden?"



Verbesina at Brandywine Cottage, created by David L. Culp and Michael Alderfer.

This is what he and Michael Alderfer, partners for 20 years, do. And until recently, when they hired a once-a-month helper, they did it all by themselves, something Culp hopes will inspire others.

"We started from nothing," he says. "We don't have an endowment. We don't have a staff. We had a passion."

Both also have real jobs.

Alderfer does interior landscapes for museums, public buildings, and private clients. Culp teaches at Longwood Gardens; travels and does research and development for Sunny Border Nurseries in Connecticut; hunts for plants in the Netherlands, England, and Japan; designs gardens; lectures around the country; writes for garden publications, and is a bit of a celeb, having hobnobbed on camera with Martha Stewart no fewer than six times.

Now, after two years of writing on airplanes and in hotel rooms, Culp has produced his first book — *The Layered Garden: Design Lessons for Year-Round Beauty From Brandywine Cottage* for Timber Press, with local author Adam Levine and photographer Rob Cardillo.

Brandywine Cottage is the circa 1790 stone farmhouse adjoining two acres in Downingtown that Culp bought in 1990 and restored to include a multilayered garden, which he shares with hundreds of visitors a year from March through July.

"This time is for me," he says of fall and winter.

They, like spring and summer, are fully enjoyed in this special place, which had a spiritual resonance with Culp, a

See **LAYERS** on D4



The gardens at Brandywine Cottage: Layer upon layer of plants, rising at different heights, popping through the year, with unusual forms, colors, and textures. MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Staff Photographer

Creating a layered garden with 'peak garden moments'

LAYERS from D1

Quaker, from the moment he saw it. "I felt immediately at home," he says.

That is no surprise. Though Culp grew up in Reading and Tennessee, and lived in Georgia and North Carolina, Pennsylvania is in his DNA. His Kolb (later anglicized to Culp) ancestors — five brothers, farmers all — came to Pennsylvania from Germany 300 years ago.

In 1992, while visiting the certified-historic homestead of Dielman Kolb, one of the five, in Lederach in Lower Salford Township, Montgomery County, Culp had an epiphany. He decided then and there that at his own farmhouse, he would create a vegetable garden like his ancestor's.

It would become the heart of his Brandywine Cottage garden — utilitarian to feed the body, beautiful to feed the soul, surrounded by double borders on all sides. There would be layer upon layer of plants — not just any, but the best — that rise at different heights, pop through the year, and offer unusual forms, colors, and textures.

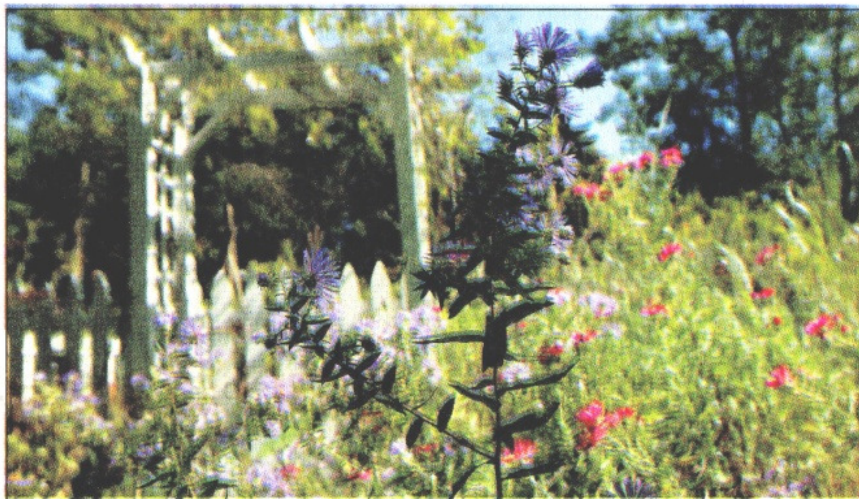
"More than just making sure one blooming plant follows another," Culp writes in his book, "layering is the art of creating a series of peak garden moments, the anticipation of which gets me out of bed in the morning."

He must leap out of bed these days. Fall's asters are pinwheels of pink and purple. The roses are fading, but the hips are grand. And as the statuesque *Angelica* drops dry seed on the ground, Culp proclaims these self-sowers — many a gardener's bane — "cheerleaders in the garden."

"I do a design and self-sowers lighten it up, making the garden not so studied," he says.

Culp is famous for the hellebores and snowdrops he breeds, and though they're sleeping now, thousands will fluff up the hillside and borders in late winter.

Then come the tulips, foxgloves, and alliums, forget-me-nots and salvias, and shrubs and trees galore — that he insists he can't live without. This garden, you see, is a mill on the heart.



Entrance to the vegetable garden. Culp decided in '92 to create a vegetable garden like his ancestor's.



A chicken coop. "I'll never be done with it," Culp says of his gardens.

grandparents' small farm in Wears Valley, Tenn., in the Smokies, where he had his own pony, chickens, calf, and gardens, and sometimes the entire summer to wander the woods before returning home to Reading.

Later, while studying psychology at the University of Tennessee and working in the men's clothing business, he would recall those carefree days and a love bordering on, sometimes crossing into, obsession for

greens.

"The call of the soil," Culp calls it, and he was always answering, visiting gardens, becoming a certified master gardener, working for a wholesale florist, doing freelance garden design.

In 1988, he moved back to Pennsylvania from North Carolina, officially career-changed. He began working at Waterloo Gardens in Devon, where he met Alderfer, taking



Pod of a peony. Gardening is "the call of the soil," Culp says, and he has always answered.



Asters at Brandywine Cottage. Fall's asters are pinwheels of pink and purple.

Culp Sightings

Horticulturist and author David L. Culp will offer perennials and new plant introductions for 2013 for sale at the Friends Fall Festival, Oct. 13 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., at the Downingtown Friends Meeting, 800 E. Lancaster Ave. (Business Route 30 west of Wegmans) in Downingtown. The event also features a silent auction, craft vendors, entertainment, kids' activities, and food. Admission and parking are free. For information, go to downingtowntofriendsmeeting.org

Culp will also speak about his new book, *The Layered Garden: Design Lessons for Year-Round Beauty From Brandywine Cottage*, on Oct. 21 at 4 p.m. in the Lang Music Building at Swarthmore College. The event, part of the Scott Associates' Fall Festival, is cosponsored by the Hardy Plant Society's Mid-Atlantic chapter. The public is welcome. The event is free. RSVP by Oct. 8 by calling 610-328-8025 or visiting scottarboretum.org/ or davidculp.com/.

versity Ambler, and relishing a career that finds him answering "the call" even now.

No doubt Culp's answer has been intensified by two near-death experiences in the last two decades. He does not share the details, but perhaps they speak for themselves in this moment:

It occurred at Brandywine Cottage after a conversation between two gardeners — one a renowned

know-nothing — that meandered pleasantly, as these things do, from one to two to three hours.

Visitor, leaving: "Are you going to work in the garden now?"

Culp: "No, I'm going to do some other things first and save the garden work till the end of the day. It's my reward."

Contact Virginia A. Smith at 215-854-5720 or

RULES REIMAGINED

David Culp is no fan of “stone tablets with rules” in the garden, but he says, “I’m no anarchist either.”

Here are some of the unwritten “rules” and Culp’s response to them:

Don’t buy a plant unless you have a space for it in mind.

“That’s like paint-by-numbers,” Culp says. “You have to allow for the art of the moment to take place. Plans and lists, yes, you have to have them. But don’t become a slave to it. What joy is that?”

He reminds: “Mother Nature is pretty chaotic.”

Always put shorter plants in front.

“Not if you like it another way,” Culp says.

Pastels or bright colors or fill-in-the-blank are “it” this year.

“Gardeners are artists and as artists, it’s our job to make colors work,” says Culp, who remembers when planting pink next to yellow was discouraged. “What color are those anthers inside that pink rose? Yellow,” he says.

It’s tough to garden in shade.

“Shade is one of my favorite things to teach and garden in,” Culp says. “Hello! Where do we live? In Penn-sylvania.”

Come fall, gardeners can finally rest.

“Boring! How could you not go outside?” Culp says, making a face.

The garden’s dead in winter.

“Anything that has the moxie to withstand the rigors of winter, you have to love that plant’s spirit,” Culp says, “and the unexpectedness of a winter bloom is very wonderful.”

I have to have every variety of my favorite plant in my garden.

Although he has 150 snowdrop varieties, Culp aims not for quantity, but quality. “I just have to have the best,” he says, which could mean \$20 or \$100 or way more for a single bulb. But look at it this way, he says. “How many \$20 lunches have you had that you can’t even remember now?”

For gardeners, getting older is especially sad.

Culp says he aims to “celebrate all seasons of the garden as well as in my life. I want all phases to be enjoyed.”

Meanwhile, he’s a regular at the gym.

— Virginia A. Smith

Trends are new.

“The trend back to planting vegetables . . . how did we ever forget about that?” Culp says. “And backyard chickens? Been doing that all my life.”

Gardens should be neat.

Culp’s garden is a mix of the wild and the geometric. The vegetable garden is square, the paths around it are mowed and uniform, the beds a lovely, naturalistic mix of what he likes – but they are not white-glove tidy. “Natural is that leaf with holes in it,” he says. “If you like perfect, take up painting. A garden is a living, growing, messy thing.”