

Chicagoland GARDENING

MAY / JUNE
2008

THE MAGAZINE FOR OUR REGION

SHRUB MAGIC

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contents

MAY / JUNE 2008

C O L U M N S

- 20 Chicago Botanic Garden News**
Back to Basics
- 22 Gardening 101**
Dealing With Flats
By Nina A. Koziol
- 24 The Indoor Garden**
Staghorn Ferns
By Lisa Baldwin
- 28 The Water Garden**
The Midwest Pond & Koi Society
Answers Your Questions
By Bob Passovoy
- 32 The Hands-On Gardener**
How to Prune Roses
By Susan Crawford
- 36 The Edible Garden**
Growing a Salsa Garden
By Michelle Byrne Walsh
- 40 Chicagoland Natives**
Down by the Riverside
By Carolyn Ulrich
- 45 Outdoor Life**
Potting Benches
By Rebecca Russell
- 50 The Gardener**
Meet Kevin Eberhard
By Nina A. Koziol
- 54 The Garden Classroom**
What's in the Bag?
By Mike Nowak
- 98 Mike Nowak**

D E P A R T M E N T S

- 4 Editor's Note**
- 6 Q & A**
By Adele Kleine
- 13 What to Do in the Garden**
Compiled By Michelle Byrne Walsh
- 14 Regional Reports**
- 18 Saturday Shopper**
By Carolyn Ulrich
- 59 Potpourri**
Gardening News and Views
- 90 Calendar of Events**
- 97 Sources**
- 96 Index of Advertisers**
- 97 Gardener's Marketplace**



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HARDLY A SECRET 70

"Sully's Secret Garden" isn't really a secret. John and Betsy Sullivan share their backyard wonderland.
By William Aldrich



PHOTO: RON CAHILL

VERSATILE VIBURNUMS 76

Beautiful, tough and interesting year-round, viburnums are must-have shrubs in any landscape.
By Linda Kiscellus



PHOTO: LINDA KISCCELLUS

CHICAGO BY DESIGN 80

This design challenge was to combine privacy while retaining a breathtaking view.
By Patrice Peltier



PHOTO: INDA OKAWA-BRYAN

A ONE-MAN SHOW 84

Ted Weber has made the grounds around his home a showplace. Welcome to Weber House and Garden.
By Lisa Baldwin

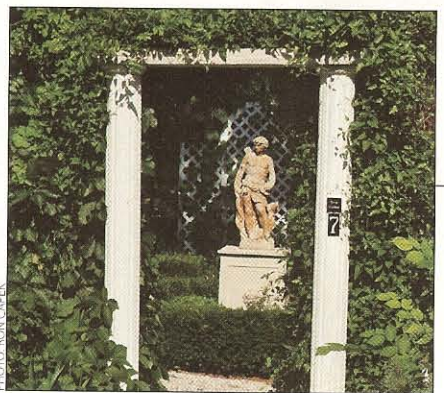
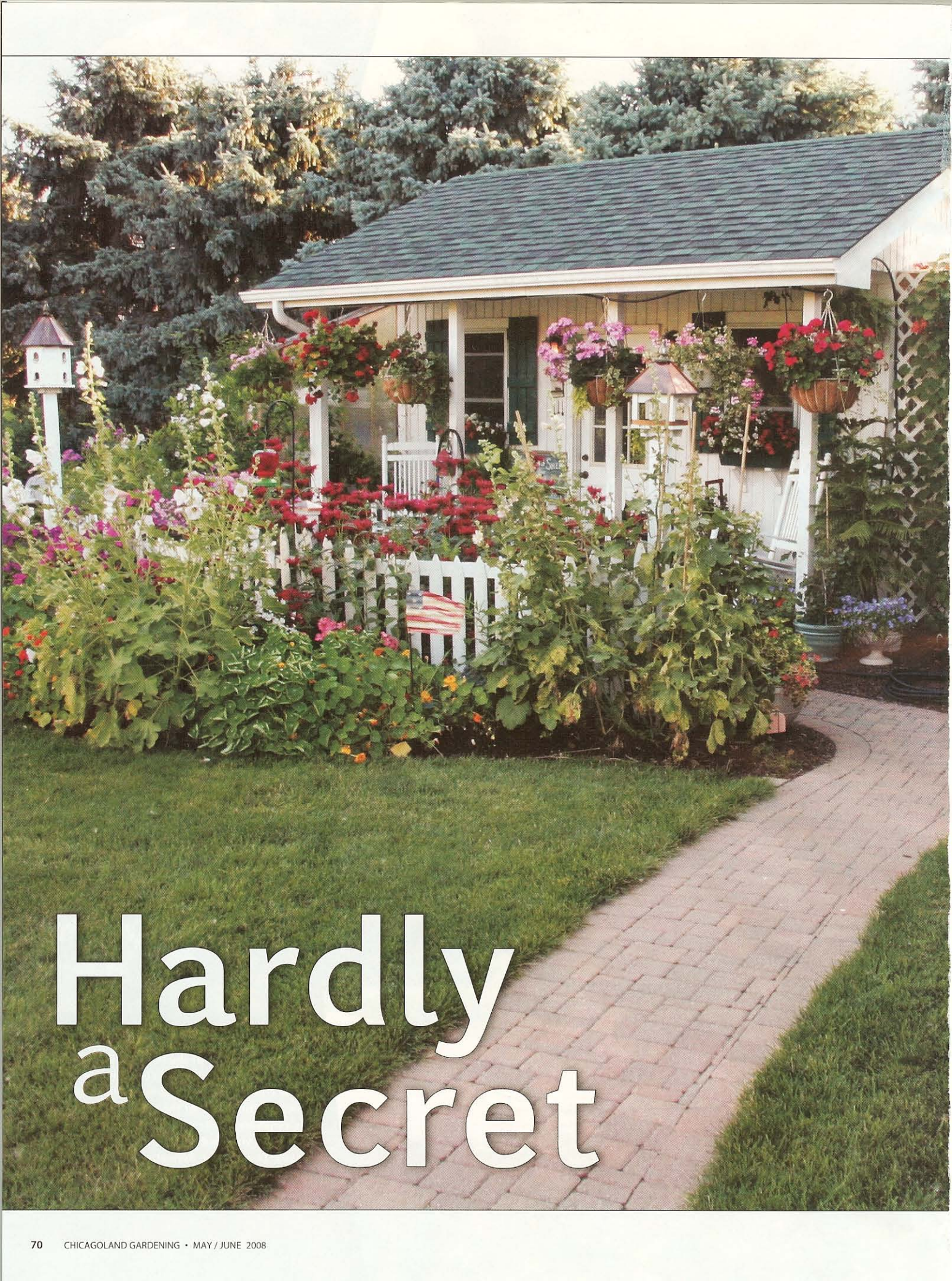


PHOTO: RON CAHILL



Hardly a Secret



Neighbors who see this backyard for the first time can't believe the extent of John and Betsy Sullivan's gardens. The Sullivans enjoy sharing the gardens—and will again the last weekend of June.

"Buddy" enjoys a cool spot near John Sullivan's "cottage" that is nearly hidden by plantings of hollyhock, monarda and the flowing baskets of annuals hanging from the roofline.

PHOTO: RONN CARPER

By William Aldrich



An arborvitae hedge frames a sunny turf area near the home. A large bed of impatiens grows in the area where a large shade tree had been removed.

PHOTO: RON CARER

There's a metal sign in John Sullivan's storage shed (really more of an elegant cottage) proclaiming "Sully's Secret Garden." The backyard is ringed by mature evergreens that screen a busy street and neighboring homes. The Sullivans' ranch-style home takes care of the front. So it is a surprise to saunter past the house on a stone path, curve into the side yard and approach an arbor that opens to an eclectic combination of gardens. Welcome to "Sully's Secret Garden."

John has never been shy about sharing his secret. The Sullivans entered a garden contest sponsored by a local newspaper and received an honorable mention. "We wondered why and went to see the winning gardens," he recalls. "They all had ponds." Cue the pond builders. "After we installed ours, we got second place."

John and his wife Betsy shared their garden last summer on behalf of the Joliet Area Community Hospice. Betsy

organized the Hugs and Hearts Garden Walk to raise money for the pediatric care unit of the hospice and attracted enough publicity that more than \$8,000 was raised. She'll do the same again this year and "Sully's Secret Garden" will be open Saturday, June 28.

Their connection to the hospice is a deeply personal one. One of the Sullivan's eight grandchildren was born with severe cerebral palsy and seizure disorders. Daughter Kelly and husband Tim Davis were told their son would never walk or speak and would require constant medical care. Much of that care has been provided by the hospice, a privately funded facility.

"The nurse who takes care of Timmy was on a garden walk and we went," recalls Betsy of the germination of her idea. "We wanted to focus the donations on the children's side. The staff helps so much with care, providing whatever families need for their kids or telling you where to go to get

it. We've had them for nearly six years and wanted to give back."

Kim Cast, coordinator for pediatric care at the hospice, says working with the Sullivans is a two-way street. "When Betsy finds out I need something, they look for it for me," says Cast. "They always try to give back, they don't just take services. They are a wonderful asset to our family."

Family Home

The Sullivans' home is in a subdivision in Plainfield, a town where Betsy grew up and where John started a landscaping business after graduating from Lewis University. John used to cut the lawn at Betsy's parents' home and met Betsy in the process. John helped build their Plainfield home, serving as the general contractor. Colorado and blue spruces that line the back of the lot were brought from a previous home and moved "four or five places here before they found a permanent home," John says.

A Day in John's Garden

John Sullivan's "cottage" was a shed—until he added a greenhouse to one side. He then added a greenhouse off the other side, which he calls his cold greenhouse. Then he added a porch, big enough for a rocking chair. To an outsider, the shelves of the cottage may appear a random collection of garage-type oddities, but to John, they all serve a purpose for his garden. On the floor is a mini-boiler John found online that heats water and runs through pipes to provide heat to the greenhouse.

During the summer, John can call on 28 zones to provide water to his "secret" gardens, all controlled by a computer. Four are drip lines, 13 are irrigation heads for turf and 11 are for flowerbeds. A computer program tells each component when to come on and for how long and records it in a log. That way, only one device is using water at any one time. When rain sensors are activated, the watering stops, and this season John will add sensors for soil moisture to determine if water is needed.

In winter, John carries water to the cottage where he fills a 100-gallon tank. That is hooked to a water pump that pushes water to drip lines to keep his seedlings (or other overwintering plants) moist. The computer monitors the pump, exhaust fan, boiler, outside temperature, and readings for the cottage, greenhouse and cold greenhouse.

In early February, John sent a photo of the first flower on a black-eyed Susan vine he propagated in October. "Next week, I will start several trays of seeds," he wrote. "I have no time for cabin fever."

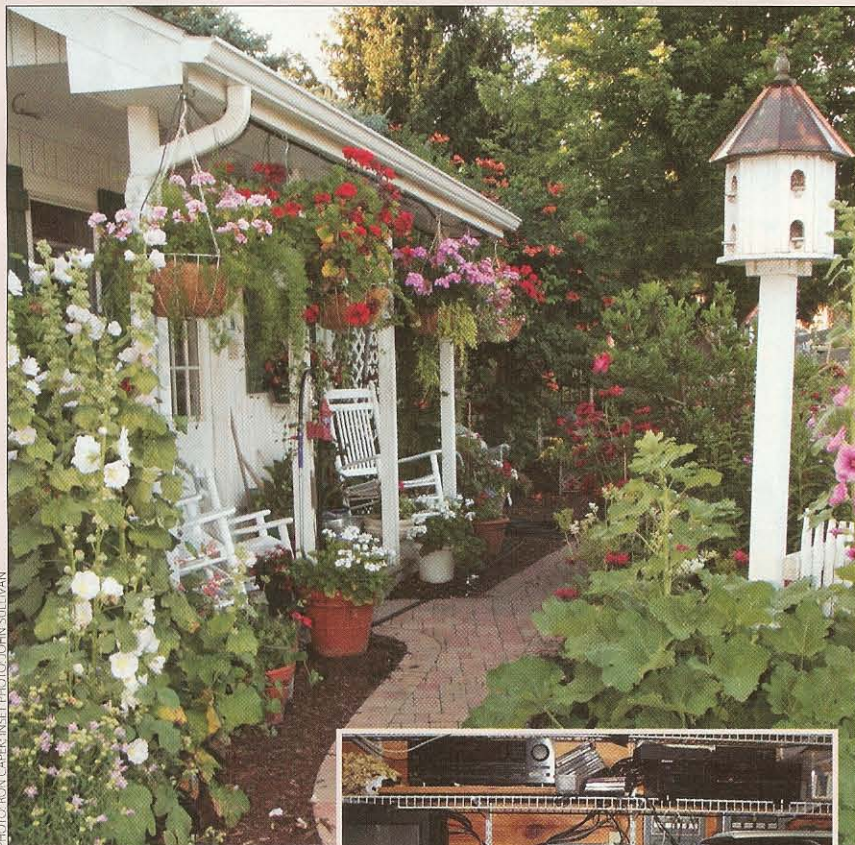


PHOTO: RON CARPER; INSET PHOTO: JOHN SULLIVAN

Rocking chairs on the "porch" of the cottage allow the Sullivans to watch hummingbirds drawn by the colorful plantings. At right, the inside of the cottage holds the electrical equipment John uses to trigger irrigation systems throughout the gardens.

Tinkering with elements of his secret garden took a back seat while the couple raised four children. In the early years, the in-ground swimming pool took center stage, but as the children became adults, the focus on the garden returned. One summer, a daughter held her wedding in the garden and the day after, John and Betsy went to work tearing out lawn and beginning a complete transformation of the landscape.

John had a shed, which became a "cottage," to which he appended a greenhouse, which led to another greenhouse on the other side. And with the porch, he has a place to sit in a rocker and watch hummingbirds that are invariably attracted to a large planting of bee balm, another find from going on garden walks.

Inside the cottage is a computer that governs the watering system, turning on and off the irrigation for 28 different zones on the 3/4-acre property. There is a stereo system that is wired not only to the cottage, but also throughout the garden and pool area. There are two large water storage tanks to keep greenhouse plants happy in winter when the water system is off. They are tied to drip systems that allow for automatic watering of seedling flats in the spring. A mini-boiler that John found online heats water to operate the heating system in the greenhouse—under the floor and a winged baseboard system. There also is a television with cable so John can keep up with the latest sports broadcasts. "I like to tinker with electrical systems," he says of his many refinements.

Building the Garden

John and Betsy started digging their pond in 2001, defining a berm to act as the backdrop. It became apparent that professionals could do it quicker and better, and the pond was completed that season. In 2006, the Sullivans decided to add a waterfall between the pond and their swimming pool. The waterfall cascades from a flat stone extending from a berm and spills water to a rocky stream several feet below. That stream courses under a bridge into the original pond. John has seen his water quality improve markedly with the



A lotus rises majestically from the main pond. Large koi can be observed from the oriental-style bridge Sullivan and a friend constructed in 2002.



The original feature of the Sullivan backyard was the swimming pool, now surrounded by a low stone wall that gives the Sullivans even more room for containers. A raised pergola gives commanding views of the pool, gardens and ponds. At left, John and Betsy Sullivan behind a beautiful display of monarda.



PHOTOS: RON CAPEK

addition of a second pump. His 3,500 gallons of water are recycled three times an hour.

John and a friend built the oriental-style bridge in 2002. Next to it is a handsome pergola built by the same duo two years later. The wooden pergola provides shade to the mostly sunny backyard and offers a fine vantage point for viewing the garden.

Paths laid in paving blocks connect several areas of the gardens. The Sullivans liked the look enough to have the chain-link fence removed from the pool area and a low stone wall constructed. It provides places to sit in addition to the more refined look.

Garden beds sprinkled throughout the yard range from annuals to perennial to shrubs. A border of arborvitae has grown into a formidable tall hedge in just a few short years. John installed a drip irrigation system along the entire 90-foot bed to provide sufficient mois-

ture. Containers are full and lush, aided by a drip irrigation system that provides 40 minutes of water daily. The hanging baskets still demand hand watering, a half-hour daily chore, but those are scheduled for a drip system as well.

John also likes to grow annuals. He buys impatiens plugs, minimum 500 of one color, and transplants them into flats of 48 plants each. Raised in the greenhouse, they are then transplanted throughout the gardens—sun, shade, wherever color is needed. Thanks to the irrigation system, the plants get enough water even in high light situations.

John is forever tinkering. A case in point from last year's garden: a centerpiece garden of mixed impatiens replaced the erstwhile site of a mature silver maple. John says when the maple was removed, he simply piled soil on top of the stump, transplanted the impatiens, covered the bed with a

shade cloth for two weeks to acclimate the plants, then let the plants go. The effect was all color, a welcoming burst to the yard. But late in the season about a quarter of the circle died out and John isn't sure of the cause.

Ah, a reason to try it again and discover the mystery. For a tinkerer of John Sullivan's caliber, there must be a system he can put in place to solve the problem. 🌱

Hugs & Hearts

The 2nd Annual Timmy's Hugs and Hearts Garden Walk will be held Saturday, June 28, from 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. The walk benefits the Hugs & Hearts Pediatric Hospice Program and the Sunshine Pediatric Palliative Care Program of the Joliet Area Community Hospice.

Tickets purchased in advance are \$10 (\$12 at the walk). To buy tickets call 815-436-2480 or go to the Joliet Area Community Hospice, 250 Water Stone Circle, Joliet. For more information call 815-740-4104 or visit www.joliethospice.org.