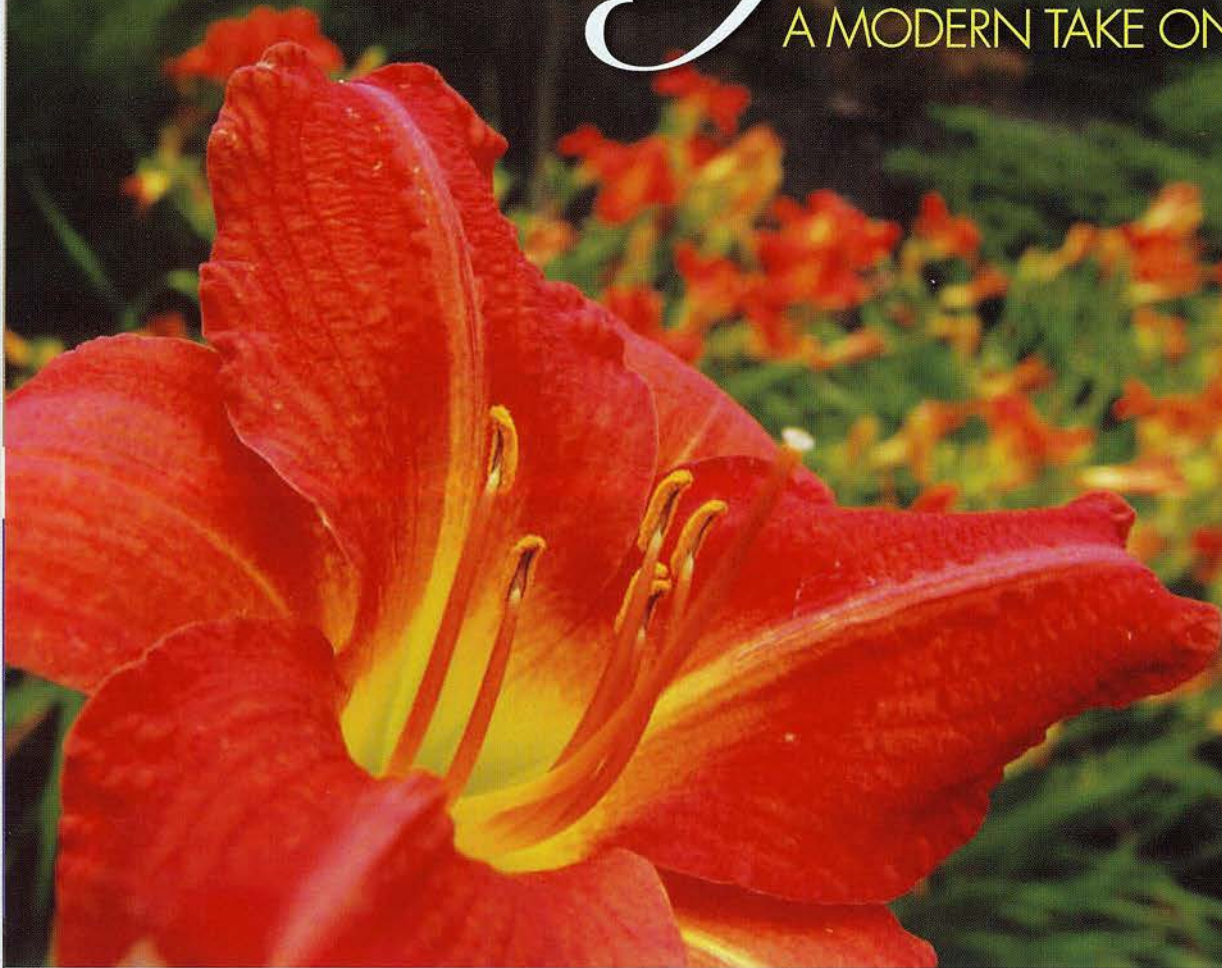


THE ENGLISH COTTAGE
garden
A MODERN TAKE ON A CLASSIC



The English cottage-style garden is a haphazard affair. A wild and densely planted mixture of ornamental and edible plants, it represents a functional garden connected to working class citizens going back several centuries. Its beauty depends on charm and grace, rather than grandeur.

This distinct garden style originally used structured edges (usually rectangular) to contain a chaotic blend of shrubs, perennials, annuals, herbs and edibles. They included slim, straight paths with whimsical furnishings and structures such as waddle fencing and rose arbours. The use of scrambling vines was and still is essential to this classic method. Busy pollinators love these types of gardens for their emphasis on the “flower” rather than a beautiful leaf or habit. What I am drawn to personally about this garden approach is that each year is different. The self-seeding quality of much of the plant materials makes the landscape change year to year, depending on which plant took hold the previous year. Therefore I am never bored.

Originating in the middle ages, the emphasis of the cottage garden was absolutely on vegetables, herbs and even fruit trees, with ornamentals to fill in between. Typical plant materials used were primrose, thyme, calendula, violets, daisies, roses, ivy etc., but any locally found vegetation would do. Over time the perennial, shrubs and annuals became more dominant. As this style of gardening evolved, quirky arbours and rustic furniture were added. More stylized versions grew in the 1870s in reaction to more structured and high maintenance English estate gardens that used formal design and mass plantings of dazzling greenhouse annuals.

Modern-day cottage gardens house a wide variety of modern plant materials and personal variations of the more traditional English cottage garden. Ornamental grasses, hosta and daylily, plus new varieties of tidy flowering shrubs do much to modernize. Curvature has also been added, with wide borders and sweeping curves. Traditional roses, with their full fragrance and lush foliage, continue to be a cottage garden foundation – along with current disease-resistant varieties that keep the original

attributes. Informal vines, both traditional and modern hybrids, are still a cottage garden mainstay. Self-sowing annuals and freely spreading perennials continue to find a place in the new cottage garden, just as they did in the traditional cottager’s garden. What they share with the tradition is the lush, relaxed look, covering every square inch, with a rich variety of flowers, herbs, and vegetables.

Many people are attracted to this garden style due to the “natural” feeling they evoke. They look as if no planning was necessary to create their beauty, but buyers beware. These gardens are still high maintenance. Weekly weeding and deadheading are necessary to keep plants looking even somewhat controlled. If this doesn’t scare you and you still decide that this is the garden-type for you, it is essential to mass plant with a smaller list of vegetation and repeat, rather than using a massive inventory. Create balance and harmony within the bed with the size of the plant, shape of the blooms, leaf size and habit. But remember, an English cottage garden is all about surprise! Consider hedging such as privet to contain and give a neater appearance, and use mulch to make weeding less of a chore. If using potted plants, keep pots the same colour. They can be different sizes and shapes, but by keeping the colour consistent, you are creating a foundation for the plantings. They don’t have to be a neutral colour like clay or brown. Consider a bold colour such as royal blue or yellow. Such pop of colour, although not traditional, can be seen in many current day English cottage gardens and will keep your landscape up to date.

Gardens are forever growing and changing and this is what keeps us enamoured with them. Let them have a little more freedom and you may be surprised. Sometimes Mother Nature makes a better combination than what we can ever imagine ourselves. **OH**

