



SQUARE ROOTS

A constantly evolving garden in Connecticut treads a fine line between romantically loose and tightly manicured, firmly grounded by the clipped evergreen geometry of yew and boxwood.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **PEDEN + MUNK**
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THE LAY OF THE LAND

ABOVE For George Schoellkopf, gardening is not so much a means to an end as a dynamic, decades-long process.
OPPOSITE Boxwood hedges in a parterre garden next to the house corral herbs and perennials.

How much could an ordinary backyard gardener learn from a garden as beautifully grand as the one seen here? A lot, it turns out. Hollister House, a 1770 Washington, Connecticut, home, may look like it could be found in a screen adaptation of a Jane Austen novel, but it's purely American. In fact, it's a contemporary garden started a few decades ago by a Texas transplant with a love of both early-American antiques and all things English. And even though it seems as if it has always been here, with its hedges, walls, and outdoor rooms tucked into a hillside location, George Schoellkopf's dream garden required a lot of imagination, planning—and even a bulldozer.

The house lacked any sort of proper garden when he bought it in 1976. "There was not one bit of level surface to make a garden behind the house," Schoellkopf says. "It was all slope, from the back door down to the long pond." The self-taught gardener admired the classic English garden designs he'd found on his travels to Sissinghurst and Hidcote, and knew he wanted a similar plan featuring outdoor rooms divided by hedges and walls, with several different levels for added visual drama. To accomplish this, he first took a pencil to graph paper and mapped out his ideas. But he quickly realized that a flat piece of paper didn't account for topography and certainly couldn't reflect how his yard sloped in two directions. So to visualize his plan, Schoellkopf devised an ingenious method of working it out in clay, producing a small sculpted model of the terraced garden he wanted.

To move a large amount of soil, Schoellkopf hired a man with a bulldozer, and the land started to take shape—after they'd demolished "every living thing in the process, mind

you," he says with a bemused shake of his head. But as any designer knows, to create, sometimes you have to destroy. Next, Schoellkopf built a retaining wall to make an upper terrace where he could plant a classic parterre garden. Over the years, as time and money would allow, he kept adding features—a reflecting pool, a hedged walkway, a potager patch, a garden house—always working in the English country vernacular that was appropriate to the Colonial style of the house. Today, the garden is recognized by the Garden Conservancy as one of the nation's most exceptional; the organization is partnering with Schoellkopf for future stewardship through its preservation programs.

Hollister House is more than a garden of strict formality; it has a romance that Schoellkopf achieved through a series of clever tricks. A plant lover, he knows that well-chosen foliage and flowers are a necessity to soften the rigidity of the geometric hedges and terrace walls. And while Schoellkopf and his partner, photographer Gerald Incandela, aim to be meticulous, they aren't afraid of celebrating a few happy accidents: The geometry of the garden ultimately turned out a little off-kilter, so certain axes and intersections don't exactly line up. "It's a garden of right angles," explains Schoellkopf, "but not every one of them came out right." It's that yin and yang of nature and nurture that make a garden like Hollister House exciting to see in person. "There's a fine line between full and generous, and messy and sloppy," Schoellkopf says. "We enjoy the excitement that comes from trying to always rescue it from that edge at just the right moment."

Hollister House Garden (hollisterhousegarden.org) is a nonprofit operating in conjunction with the Garden Conservancy. The gardens are open to the public every Saturday from May through September.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT French doors lead into a garden house. A collection of handmade terra-cotta pots. A view of the property from across the long pond shows the garden's signature layers of geometry. A pristine foxglove. OPPOSITE A vine-cloaked wall and an arched doorway frame a garden.



Valmont the poodle enjoys a small lawn behind an addition to the original house, surrounded by flower borders, climbing vines, and roses.
OPPOSITE The formal vegetable garden, a fairly recent addition, is defined by neat hedges of clipped boxwood and rows of vegetables and flowers.



Seven Elements of a Formal Garden Anyone Can Use

Any garden—large or small, urban or country—can take a few cues from Hollister House's use of formal effects. The key is to divide your space into a dynamic series of visual events.



1 CREATE STRONG GEOMETRY

Formal gardens have long relied on squares and rectangles to define space. These hedges, walls, and pathways provide a sense of structure and hold in blowsy flower beds and shrubs. Counterintuitively, the visual trick often makes small spaces seem larger. **EXPERT TIP:** Use dwarf boxwoods or raised beds to create a garden of square planting beds where there would ordinarily be an open lawn or a terrace.



2 FIND THE RIGHT STONE AND BRICK

A former antiques dealer, Schoellkopf is a great believer in patina. He uses the rougher backside of cut stone for steps so their surface reveals a more natural, appealing texture. He also prefers hand-molded bricks that show small imperfections. **EXPERT TIP:** Look for local salvage from municipal paving or old construction to get the most interesting irregular pieces and to avoid a newly installed look.



4 CONSIDER AN ORNAMENT

Even for the experienced garden designer, follies, statues, and decorative pieces can be challenging to use successfully. For the average home gardener, it can be tough to know when you're crossing the line into the land of tchotchkes. At Hollister House there are only a few decorative items, each placed to accent a view or an alignment. **EXPERT TIP:** Pick a plain plant backdrop, like this Boston ivy.



5 GO FOR BIG, BOLD PLANTINGS

Flower beds packed full of large plants add their own sense of enclosure to garden spaces. The stems and leaves of tall perennials, such as plume poppy, and shrubs, such as butterfly bush, move in the breeze and add delicate patterns and shadows over walkways and bricks. **EXPERT TIP:** Soften the edges of stone pavers with billowing herbs that spill over onto the stone walking surface.



6 HIGHLIGHT TRANSITIONS

Hollister House is a garden divided into a series of roomlike spaces. Each is linked by a carefully considered walkway or portal, giving visitors the feeling that surprise awaits around each corner. It makes them more attentive and encourages them to stop and look at what surrounds them. **EXPERT TIP:** Change the level between spaces with a small step or two, so each feels different from the others.



3 ADD HEDGES AND WALLS

Schoellkopf mainly uses two kinds of room dividers: dry stone or mellow red brick, and tall, clipped hedges of classic dark yew. Even a small backyard can be made to appear larger by screening off the entire space with a trellis or hedge of tall plants. **EXPERT TIP:** Trim hedges slightly wider at the bottom so all the branches get some sunlight. This technique keeps the bases from becoming bare.



7 NURTURE A PERFECTLY IMPERFECT LAWN

Bright green patches of mown grass are a signature of the traditional English garden. Schoellkopf contrasts his with larger areas of gravel or flagstone. Here, the lawn is just one of many textures for the "flooring" of the garden. **EXPERT TIP:** Schoellkopf lets clover invade his grass because it can be mown extra-short, it's drought-resistant, and, from afar, it's as verdant as the most pristine turf.

ILLUSTRATED BY KENTON POWELL

