

House & Garden  
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# SPRING



# PROMISE

Henriette Suhr is confident enough to use old standbys like azaleas, rhododendrons, and even forsythia to give her garden a modern look

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY RICHARD FELBER

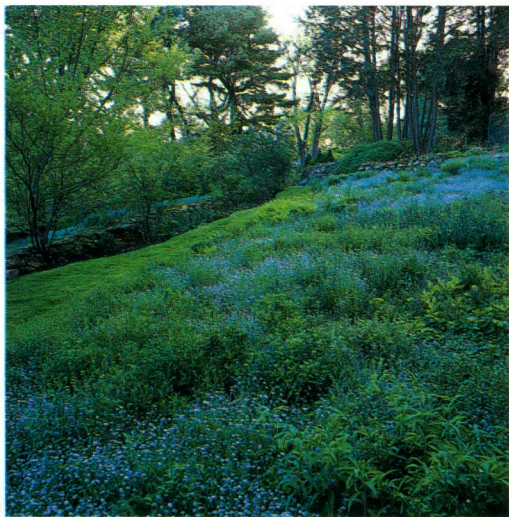
Fresh foliage and clear light announce the arrival of spring in Henriette Suhr's garden, left. Unusual hybrids of magnolia, like yellow 'Elizabeth,' this page, top left, and white 'Merrill,' below left, brighten the meadow.











The spring meadow, left, goes from a self-sown carpet of blue forget-me-nots to a field of oxeye daisies in summer. Both are Darwinian survivors, having muscled out the other flowers from a mixed wildflower seed packet planted years ago. ■ A tapestry of greens, opposite page, in a variety of shades and in many shapes, including prostrate, weeping, clipped, and mounded, beckons the visitor to the front door. At the back of the lawn are the rounded forms of Suhr's "vulgar" forsythia.



**h**ENRIETTE SUHR is such a deft and stylish gardener that she can make the horticulturally outmoded look chic. Great expanses of bright azalea and clipped balls of forsythia—plants now out of favor—light up the hillsides in Suhr's Mt. Kisco, New York, garden. Her late friend and fellow gardener Paul Mayen regularly bemoaned the vulgarity of her forsythia.

But, as Suhr explains, "we put it there in the mid-fifties, when forsythia was not so bad, and so there it is."

Not only are they "not so bad," but this garden and its plantings are quite wonderful precisely because Suhr has remained true to her own design sense for more than 40 years. Begun with her husband, Billy, in 1956, this garden, with its sculpted forms and boomerang-shaped beds, has a midcentury-modern sensibility that looks as fresh today as when it was new.

Henriette Suhr is gracious, with as strong a sense of her own aesthetic as of herself. She is the sort of woman who dresses for dinner and delivers her opinions—decrying, for instance, the commissioning of gardens by people who don't garden—with ladylike grace.







As patrician as she looks in her wellies and straw hat, she spends most of her days on her knees, weeding.

At the time that she began work on the garden, Suhr was head of the interior decorating department at Bloomingdale's, where she introduced furniture designers such as Robsjohn-Gibbings and Faniel in her famous model-room displays. Her late husband Billy, a ruggedly handsome man, was a conservator of paintings, working for the Frick, among other institutions. The Suhrs took off work every July and August to travel the world. Their home is filled with collections of pictures, rugs, and objects that chronicle their shared history.

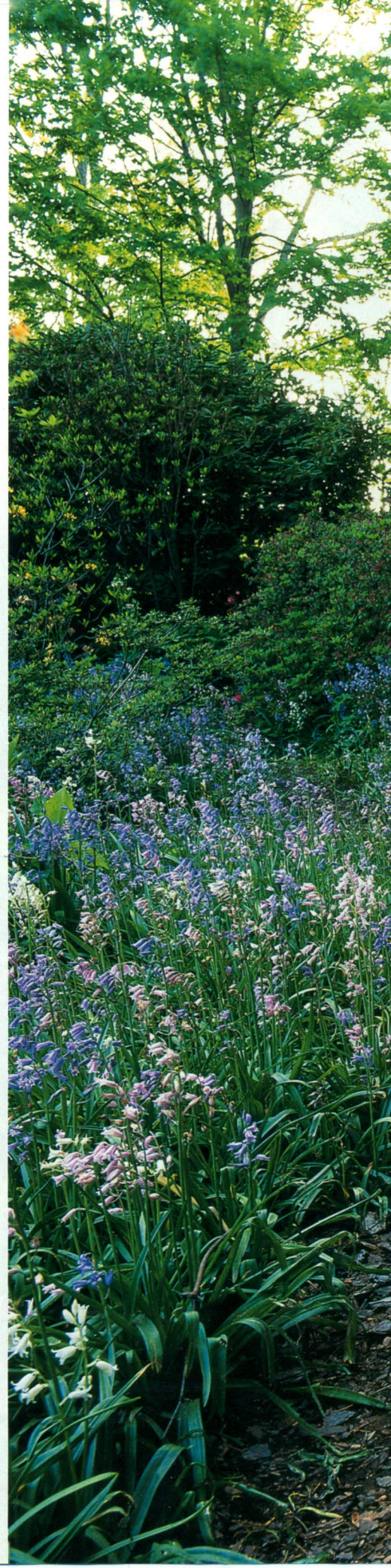
But from March until July each year, the two stayed put, devoting every weekend to their garden, which, Suhr says, evolved without a plan or "even a piece of paper with notes on it." There was none of the

usual spousal division of tasks, either; the two simply did everything in tandem. Like the house, the garden is a series of artfully arranged collections. In addition to the rhododendrons and azaleas, which number in the thousands, it boasts a remarkable collection of tree peonies, a burgeoning fern collection, and rare magnolias, including many unusual yellows, originating from the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

Despite evolving without a plan, the garden has sureness and clarity of design. Its curving paths and beds, as well as its clipped and mounded forms, show a Japanese influence. The rounded trees and shrubs, such as magnolia, hemlock, and of course the poor, maligned forsythia, play against the more free-form shapes of the candy-colored azaleas. Under these plantings, enormous carpets of wood hyacinths (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*) and scores of other population-increasing bulbs fill the ground in spring. The hill-sides also burst into bloom with a succession of bulbs in



Suhr rests for a moment in her garden, top. ■ A river of color runs through a manicured bank of evergreens and deciduous trees, above, leading the eye down to a stream and beyond to a lawn. ■ Several hundred wood hyacinths (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*), opposite page, planted years ago, have multiplied into tens of thousands, and now spread themselves at the feet of one of Suhr's mature plantings of 'Kurume' azalea.











The screened porch, this page, top, faces a Japanese-style pond with mossy stepping-stones. ■ Cuttings from Suhr's tree peony collection fill Venetian bud vases, left. ■ In a colorful cacophony, opposite page, the papery pink 'Shintench'i' tree peonies are luminous below green fern fronds, wild pink geraniums, and yellow and purple deciduous azaleas. Sources, see back of book.

huge swaths, and the sides of the brook erupt with a riotous profusion of primula in early spring. The restraint here is in the lines of the garden's design.

Despite all the visual excitement, it is really a contemplative place—a "stroll garden" in the Japanese sense. And when Suhr "leaves these shores," as she puts it, her private masterpiece will become a public sanctuary. She has made arrangements with the Garden Conservancy and the Westchester County Parks Department to preserve the garden as open space. But for now Suhr is busy gardening: she is ordering new azaleas, despite having no place left to put them, and is experimenting with some hardy varieties of camellia.

She also succumbed to Mayen's unrelenting pressure by ripping out a hedge of forsythia near the front of the house. To her delight, that has not only opened up magnificent views but, better yet, opened up new possibilities in a garden otherwise packed to the gills. ❧

