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DESIGN

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GARDEN ENVY

Bunny Williams and
her Connecticut oasis



Idyll Discoveries • How Bunny Williams turned her backyard into a gardener's mecca
• A Cape house keeps a low profile with high style • The past lives on in a quaint cottage
and its tenpins alley • Art, color, and lively textiles define a uniquely personal space ■



MARCO, A RESCUED dog, stands watch on the limestone blocks that outline Bunny Williams's pool. Story, Page 114.

PHOTO BY LYNN KARLIN

SOMETHING OF A LARK, the pool house is patterned after a Greek Revival temple and built using columns of white oak salvaged from a nearby estate. After dinner, guests can wander down the path to the equally rustic woodland garden.

ALMOST HEAVEN

Mistakes were made, admits design guru Bunny Williams, but in the end, she tamed her Connecticut landscape into a welcoming oasis



If her garden once brought Bunny Williams to her knees, there is no hint that the landscape bursting with delicious idiosyncrasies on 12 acres in Connecticut's Litchfield Hills was once the devil to design.

"When I started gardening, I made every mistake known to mankind," says Williams, gesturing to the outdoor space that is the stuff of dreams. Literally. Gardeners — professionals and wannabes alike — have been known to tuck a copy of Williams's book, *An Affair With a House* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2005), under their pillow at night in the hope that some of its brilliance would seep into their design psyche.

Who would imagine that this garden, which seems to fly through the air with the greatest of ease, sputtered and clanked before it got off the ground? After all, Williams

is an interior designer extraordinaire, whose credentials, talent, and insight have earned her access to the inner sanctums of the rich and famous for half a century. She started with design icon Sister Parish at the legendary Parish-Hadley Associates in New York before striking out on her own and founding the internationally acclaimed Bunny Williams Inc. in 1988. In 1991, she and her husband, antiques luminary John Rosselli, opened the New York garden shop *Trellage*. Then in 2008, she launched *Beeline Home*, her own line of home furnishings.

Williams readily acknowledges that garden design

THE CONSERVATORY OFF the barn (FACING PAGE) came about with the chance discovery of the arching doors in front of a local antiques shop. Balance and contrast make the back-to-back perennial borders in the sunken garden (ABOVE) visually compelling.



"Whether I'm doing a room or a garden, I don't want it to feel decorated. I want it to feel comfortable. I want it to be relaxed."

— BUNNY WILLIAMS



WILLIAMS PAUSES IN THE conservatory (ABOVE, LEFT), her favorite place at Manor House. Potted plants give the patio (ABOVE, RIGHT) a sense of enclosure. FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Spring bulbs bloom in the parterre garden; even the vegetable garden has panache, with its antique forcers poised to shelter tender crops; dahlias share the kitchen garden; a larger-than-life wire orb brings levity to the woodland.

inflicts its own set of rules. There are, of course, correlations between it and its interior counterpart, but there are many points of departure. Yet, says Williams, the goal is the same: "Whether I'm doing a room or a garden, I don't want it to feel decorated. I want it to feel comfortable. I want it to be relaxed." Getting there takes finding a simpatico design despite a flummoxing lack of frame. "In a room, you're given a confined space," she says. "Outside, there's open volume. The sky is infinite; there are no confines. You have to make the space."


With typical candor, she admits that in the beginning she "bought every plant imaginable — but they didn't make a garden." Manor House, the sprawling 1840 farmhouse and its barn that she and Roselli bought in 1997, has always been paramount to her gardening approach. "The harmony between land and house is everything," she says. So it was logical for her to start her outdoor odyssey with the sunken perennial borders just a

few steps from the white clapboard building. "The more I enclosed the space, the stronger and more interesting the garden became. It became a space, cutting out the rest of the world." Gradually, she tipped the ante. "Because the house is big, I needed strong and bold plants." Today, garden beds of mammoth proportions are a heavenly match with house and barn.

But heaven didn't happen overnight. It took time to create the series of lounging patios skirting the sprawling farmhouse, the sunken garden with a set of larger-than-life perennial borders around a reflecting pool, the vine-encased pergola leading to a parterre with French roots but New England sensibilities, and the guest quarters/conservatory attached to the barn.

There's also a dovecote, kitchen/cutting garden, orchard, pool house, and woodland garden that, with its thousands of wildflowers, was the problem child Williams accuses of "bringing me to my knees." Each



A photograph of a rustic pool house with a stone wall and a swimming pool in a lush green setting. The pool house has a wooden roof and is supported by several thick, weathered wooden columns. The pool is built with stone blocks and is surrounded by a green lawn. There are several potted plants and a lounge chair in the foreground.

WILLIAMS AND HUSBAND John Rosselli didn't install a pool until they found fitting limestone blocks in France to give it just the right ambiance. They equipped the Greek-inspired pool house with a huge fireplace to warm guests when the sun doesn't cooperate.

“Every part of the garden needs a place to stop, a place where you can sit down with a glass of wine and be there.” — BUNNY WILLIAMS



A PAIR OF BLOSSOMING apple trees (ABOVE) form a soft cloud framing the exit from the pond area. Williams is fond of inserting punctuation points that lead from space to space, such as the stone steps and ornaments that give the entry to the rustic woodland garden (FACING PAGE) a moment of grandeur.

garden is a triumph of design, seductively leading from one mesmerizing space to the next, making visitors feel more like participants than guests. “Every part of the garden needs a place to stop, a place where you can sit down with a glass of wine and be there,” says Williams. “Just walking through, you don’t get a sense of the space. You have to commune, listen, and look.”

She fusses with the transitions — most of her gardens were born because she couldn’t bear a walkway that abruptly stopped or a focal point that didn’t lead to yet another delight. The pergola dripping with clematis and the arching path through the orchard are examples of Williams playing with controlled space versus natural space and satisfying her resolve that nothing feel stuffy. “I want [the landscape] to be interesting; it needs different experiences. I want it to have personality and mood.”

The grotto-like pool house with its tree-trunk columns, the *fruit bois* furniture secreted in the woods, the wedding cake-like topiary shorn to razor-sharp precision on the dining porch — it all speaks to the exuberant personality Williams wants around her home. “It’s crazy,” she says, “but I want it to be crazy.”

SUNDAY, MAY 20: Bunny Williams’s garden will be one of four on the 12th annual garden tour to benefit Trade Secrets, a women’s support services program founded by Williams. The garden weekend begins with an antiques and rare plant sale on May 19 at LionRock Farm in Sharon, Connecticut.

tradesecretsct.com

SATURDAY, JUNE 23: Williams is also opening her grounds for the Garden Conservancy Open Days.

gardenconservancy.org/pendays

