



Contrasting colors, textures and shapes of the unusual dwarf conifers in Hager's collection — including weeping larch, Hinoki false cypress and 'Montgomery' blue spruce — stand out against a backdrop of taller evergreens. Many were locally grown at the Lyons Family Nursery in Newbury.

## A Plant Lover's Garden

For nearly half a century, Carolyn Hager's green thumb has been hard at work beautifying what was once a barren lot.

**FOR TRUE PLANT LOVERS**, the garden is never done. There is always a new variety to add, a different combination to try, or an area of the design to tweak. Now that the garden may lie under a blanket of snow and the holiday hubbub has passed, Carolyn Hager of New London is thinking about next year's garden and the changes she'd like to make. "I'm always looking in magazines and catalogs for something new and different," she says. Even though her 1.3-acre lot is quite full, like a true

plant collector, she manages to find spots for new acquisitions and divisions of old favorites.

Hager and her husband own a two-and-a-half-story, chalet-style house that was purchased in 1976 as a vacation home, and they became permanent residents in 1983. "There was nothing here for landscaping," says Hager. "It was a totally blank slate."

One of her first actions was to join the local garden club. "There was so

much to learn about gardening in a different state. I had gardened in New Jersey and Massachusetts and brought pieces of some of those plants with me, but this is zone 4 and the weather can be unpredictable. I picked up a lot of tips, ideas and new plants from the other members," she explains. "The New London Garden Club also offered great programs on topics like container gardening, new plants on the market, and slideshows from famous gardens that were inspirational." Slowly but



Hager has several types of *Eucomis*, including white pineapple lilies. Bees are attracted to the long-lasting flowers of late-blooming, purple 'Millenium' alliums. Golden Japanese forest grass adds a bright touch beneath taller phlox and white coneflowers.

By Robin Sweetser | Photography by John W. Hession





A 'Prairie Fire' crabapple espalier on the back of the garage is covered with deep pink blossoms in early June. The new leaves emerge dark purple, mature to reddish green in summer and turn orange in fall.



A second-floor deck overlooks the gardens on the south side of the house. 'This garden changes from spring to fall,' Hager says.

surely, her blank slate started to fill in and become a lush oasis with something different to make note of with each step.

Forty-two years later, Hager is still hunting for exciting new plants and ways to improve what she already has growing. "I don't design anything on paper," she says. "I am a visual person, and I like to actually see it." An intrepid soul, she is not afraid to chop down large shrubs and cut back and divide plants that have outgrown their spaces. "I like the challenge with plants. I ask myself, 'Is this really going to work?' It's all trial and error but usually they are fine and grow back stronger and better."

“

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”

All the rhododendrons that edge one side of her property were grown from pieces brought from her former home. Now huge shrubs, she regularly cuts them back to keep them from taking over and replants some of the cuttings in new places.

Mother Nature often has a hand in her decisions. "Everything here has evolved," she says. "When trees come down, it goes from shade to sun and gives me the opportunity to plant something new." One of her favorite conifers — a tall, weeping Norway spruce — split in a freak May snowstorm and had to go. Now a "Ruby Falls" redbud grows in its place.

If a plant is under-performing, Hager is not shy about finding it a better home. "I dig up and move things

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around all the time,” she says. “I have a ‘Britt Marie Crawford’ ligularia that got moved three times before it was happy. Don’t be afraid to try new locations,” she advises. Her vegetable patch had been in the front yard for years, but she recently decided to change that spot into a rock garden, so the veggies were moved to six grow boxes placed around the edges of the driveway. “Everything grew great! We never had so many cucumbers,” she says. “They were growing across the yard and climbing over the shrubs.”

She also repurposes worn-out garden features. A three-tiered fountain that was down by the brook cracked, and now it’s a planter. “I don’t chuck anything!” she says with a laugh, “but maybe I should!”

While tending the abundant collection of potted plants that get moved into her sunroom for the winter, Hager plans new combinations for her containers. “I like to go for exotics in big containers like bananas, alocasia and bird of paradise,”



Top: In the woodland garden, a container of angel wing begonias lights up the shade. They were brought inside for the winter and continue to blossom in the sunroom.

Above: Even though Hager says she is not interested in flowers, preferring shrubs instead, there are always plenty of plants in bloom.

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A newly installed rock garden takes the place of an old vegetable patch. This spring will be its first, and Hager eagerly awaits the show. ‘We packed it with bulbs,’ she says.



Heathers, striped ‘Color Guard’ yucca, and burgundy-leaved Aloha lilies (*Eucomis*) are underplanted with tiny sedums in this area of the banking. Since they are not hardy here, all the *Eucomis* bulbs have to be dug up in the fall, bagged in dry peat and stored for the winter.

she says. From the sunroom door, she can step out onto the second-floor deck overlooking the gardens on one side of the house. Even in winter, her many trees and shrubs and unusual dwarf conifers lend interest and structure to the scene.

“I don’t really care about flowers,” she says. “I like a variety, especially shrubs.” Even so, there are plenty of flowering plants as well. In spring, winding paths draw you into the garden past exceptional displays including double-flowering bloodroot, fragrant Oriental and Asiatic lilies, eucomis, red crocosmia “Lucifer,”


“When trees come down, it goes from shade to sun and gives me the opportunity to plant something new.”

lots of heather and an immense white lilac. Covering the back of the garage is an espaliered “Prairie Fire” crabapple that blooms in early June.

Carolyn Hager is an incurable plant collector, and her garden is her personal work of art. She gets great joy from seeing it all come together — shrubs, perennials and annuals. Having just celebrated her 85th birthday, she wants us to know that she could not maintain, cut down and dig without the help of her righthand man Jeff Good, former landscape director at the Fells and owner of Jeffrey M. Good Landscaping, and his co-worker Sam Humphrey. “We all work together as a team,” Hager says. **NHH**

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