

Spanish Lavender 'Otto Quast' lines the walk to Kim and Mark Brockinton's home. Roses 'Crepuscle' adorn the entryway with its fragrant blooms.



in the garden

Resting quietly in a Heights neighborhood is a much-loved house and garden with a distinctive French theme. Garden designer P. Allen Smith gives us a peek inside.





(left) Set for a summer party, the pool cabana is an open roof structure that is covered with 'Lady Banks' rose. (above) The view from the house reveals the relationship of the pool to the cabana. The stone terrace color echos the color of the house. 'Lily of the Nile' (Agapanthus) is used in the summer in containers to create a bold effect.

“One of the most challenging aspects of residential garden design is making a newly-built home look and feel comfortable in its space,” said P. Allen Smith, garden designer. “Much of this has to be considered in the beginning and when set right, the rest simply evolves over time.”

That he “set it right” is evident when one views Kim and Mark Brockinton’s Little Rock, Ark., garden. The Brockintons called on Smith and his team several years ago during the throes of construction to help them get closer to the target they desired for their landscape.

“An attempt had been made at configuring a swimming pool, and we had even gone as far as having it roughed when I called Allen,” Kim said. “The shape of the pool just didn’t seem right with the house Mark and I were trying to build.”

The couple purchased a lot on Beechwood and began building a French country-style home. Kim worked with an architect from New Orleans to help articulate her designs and details to achieve their goal.

The site itself was challenging due to its elevations. For instance, from street level on the north side of the property, the drop to the pool is close to 40 feet. This is within a lot that is approximately 150 feet long and 100 feet wide.

“Scale is hugely important, yet often overlooked. It was critical that the landscape be married to the house and the site,” Smith said. So with scale and proportion in mind, the P. Allen Smith & Associates team went to work, getting their hands around the scale and proportions of the property and the emerging house.

From there, they used a system of “garden rooms” and the elements of design necessary to create these spaces. Kim and Mark met regularly with Allen, Ward Lile, designer and the team’s creative director, and Jack Hartsell, the builder. With an exchange of ideas and regular conversations about the vision, it all began to fall into place. —>

(below) The main façade of the house at 'tulip time'; bold drifts herald the entry. Smith calls this combination "Stop the Car." (clockwise) This structure is home to an outdoor fireplace and kitchen.

- The long rustic pergola is punctuated by large containers of boxwood and an abundant display of 'Apricot Beauty' tulips.
- Access to the garden from the street above is made through a stone arch and wood gates. Smith and homeowner Kim Brockinton stop to pick flowers.
- Supertunia Vista 'Bubblegum Pink' in full force.



"It is terribly important to listen when a client speaks to you. Our clients are well-traveled, intelligent people, and their opinions are not only essential, but also a key ingredient that must go into the design process. The gardens we create are meant to be a source of joy and must function and serve those we have created them for," Smith said.

The Brockintons were fortunate to save a few large oaks from the perils of construction. These oaks help anchor the house and help with the overall scale of the property. The trees also provide shade from the hot afternoons and protect the hydrangeas planted beneath them. Like other plantings in the garden, the hydrangeas are planted "en masse" or in large drifts. The blooms of hydrangeas create a dramatic moment in the garden just before the onset of summer heat. They are under-planted with hosta, ferns, strawberry begonia, and the spring blooming snowflake (*Leucojum aestivum*).

"Other key ingredients are evident in the garden. As

you walk around, you see stone, brick and path materials working with the landscape and the house. These are all natural materials and are presented with a limited vocabulary that helps underscore harmony and order," Smith said.

Kim said when visitors enter her garden they are surprised by how large it feels. The spaces do, indeed, give a sense of spaciousness one would not expect from a lot this size. As pointed out in Smith's first book, *Garden Home* (Clarkson Potter 2001), the idea of dividing a small space into rooms is a counterintuitive act. One would think this approach would make a space feel smaller, but, in fact, the space often appears larger and more commodious. This effect was achieved with the Brockintons' project at every turn. Each of the garden rooms are linked to the next, forming a circuit around the house.

"Each room is connected by a series of steps, 'halls' and focal points to capture your eye ... then, suddenly,





you find yourself in another space with another delightful view," Smith said. "It's about creating little pictures — or vignettes — that one sees along the way. That's what makes a garden interesting. We screen out views we don't like and frame or embellish those that are more appealing."

This approach is carried through to even what might at-a-glance seem inconsequential. For instance, a blind eye is often turned to side yards on narrow lots. Not in this case. This otherwise under-utilized space was turned into one of the garden's most charming assets. Here Smith and his team designed a wrought iron arbor that connects the house to a sidewall that defines the property line. Growing above is a medley of old-fashion roses and clematis. Walking under this arbor in high season is a heady experience given the aromatic qualities of old roses.

"It's also a great place for me to keep potted plants, herbs and a few perennials," Kim said.

Roses have found their way into other places in the garden. The rose growing over the doorway is an antique rose from the 1830's called "Crepesculc." Its apricot bloom resonates with the golden color of the stucco. Smith refers to the color as "cornmeal" and points out that the natural variations of hues in the stucco, coupled with the play of light give the house life and vitality.

Climbing roses were used in the front to soften the stonewall. Varieties, such as "New Dawn" and "Colette" blooms, are entwined together and rest on top of the wall. They are most heavy with bloom during the first week of May — "not long after the last tulip has stepped off the stage" according to Smith.

Mark and Kim say tulip time is their favorite time of year, despite the splendor of the roses. They both adore tulips of all types and enjoy mixing the color schemes from one spring until the next.

"We fill the beds and containers in the fall with lots of tulip bulbs for an abundant spring," Smith said. Understandably, many who pass by place the Brockintons' garden on their list for a walk by at the height of tulip time. According to Smith, Mark and Kim love tulips because of their sheer flower power, their boldness and the dramatic sweeps of pure color they provide.

Other plants were chosen to support the home's country French theme. While far from Provence, Smith pointed out that one must not be literal here, "dragging plants from one set of circumstances to another can be an expensive and risky business." He selected plants that are compatible to both regions, such as rosemary, agapanthus, and Italian Cypress. For lavenders, the design team resigned to growing it in containers or took the view that it would serve only as an annual.

"Provence' won heads above all the others," Smith said. It's the best for enduring our humid summers. Often plants, such as columnar English Oaks, European Hornbeams and Russian Olive were planted to help achieve the look. "Russian Olive or Eleagnus, because of its grey leaf, worked beautifully here — even in large pots," Smith said.

Today, some years have passed and the house and garden show a lovely patina that belies its relatively recent construction. Each season it settles more comfortably into its place, creating a timeless beauty. ■



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