

INTRODUCTION: A GARDENERS JOURNEY

Living in a historic house is not for those lacking fortitude or passion! A historic home is never “DONE” and, though inanimate, it is reliably strong and clear in its demands for an owner’s attention and resources. The same can be said of historic gardens like the ones many Charlestonians find themselves blessed to shepherd and nurture. I moved into my little house on Church Street in late 2012, rebounding, recovering and re-establishing myself after a turbulent and troubling episode in my life. I had been looking for a historic house to completely rehabilitate as that had been the path that led me towards my chosen field of interior design many decades ago; subconsciously perhaps I was looking to rebuild and restore a house as a parallel project to my own personal journey. Instead, I ended up buying an early 19th century house that had been completely renovated in 2010 but whose gardens were tired, withered and in a serious state of neglect despite a notable historic legacy. While the house is one of the smallest on Church Street, or in the SOB neighborhood for that matter, it is nestled in a series of garden “rooms”, meticulously laid out by noted landscape architect Loutrell Briggs in 1974 in one of his last designs. A 2001 update by the renowned Charleston firm led by Sheila Wertimer was the last point in time that the property itself had been refreshed.. During my first week in my new home, I came across garden and landscape plans by both of those designers crumpled and rolled up in a small and otherwise useless cabinet. I have had the plans drawn by Briggs restored and framed and they now hang in the front hallway as a permanent part of the history of 62 Church Street. As I reflect now, I believe that discovery was the initial signal from the house and that the time and the right person had arrived to navigate the gardens of 62 Church Street into the 21st century.

In the interest of full disclosure, while my profession is interior design, my passion has always been with gardens, flowers and the architecture of gardens. I painstakingly designed, built, restored and maintained English rose gardens, perennial beds, woodland shade gardens and a stone wall encapsulated “Secret Garden” at my longtime property in New Jersey. Knowing this passion and experience, many friends believed it was only natural that I ended up in Charleston, the city built among gardens, after leaving the maritime forest of Kiawah. Yet it was this very heritage as a lifelong Zone 6 gardener that stifled me in Charleston. As someone who always innately knew what worked and what thrived, I found myself uncertain of the challenges of tropical fauna and fearful that I could not possibly bear the risk of somehow desecrating these hallowed grounds. In the three years that I have lived here, I have tinkered and experimented with superficial re-planting but hesitated to embark on any major or structural undertakings. That is until the house and the gardens gave the clear instructions that I mentioned in the opening paragraph.

It all started because, after almost three years of daily reconnaissance walks to scout the gardens South of Broad, I had decided that one element was definitely missing from my property: Palm trees. I believe I needed this as much for my own psychological happiness as for what this northerner deemed to be a serious omission in her Charleston gardens. Palms in several areas would provide the basis for the vertical structure needed in each space and I would work my way to the underplantings in due time. Three types of Palms in three of my distinctive “rooms”: the fountain garden, the courtyard garden and the corridor garden. I studied and selected the three species of Palms by size, foliage and architectural attributes. The formal courtyard would be anchored by a single Pindo or Jelly Palm and the slightly asymmetrical fountain garden, lush with its thick ground cover of variegated perennials, would receive much needed vertical interest from a grouping of three Windmill Palms staggered in size. The Palm Project would begin with the worn and scraggly corridor garden which would be lined with a formal row of statuesque Carolina Palms that would guide and shield the tropical container garden that I wanted to create along that walkway. I ordered the Palms and scheduled the installation but this is when the journey derailed and the will of the house assumed command.

ADVENTURE I: The Corridor Garden

As happened all too much in 2015, Charleston was deluged with more continuous days of heavy rain than we have ever seen or care to witness again. I had some water come through a second floor window---not in the original 1814 house but in the small early 1970's addition that borders the side path where the allee of Carolina Palms was to be planted within a mere few weeks. Subsequent consultations with the builder I often work with, the restoration experts at Renew Urban, led to the discovery of cracks in the stucco siding. Worse, because those cracks emanated from the crown of the roof, it was their opinion and concern that that the root cause of the cracks was foundation related. When I mentioned the imminent arrival of the six tall Palm trees that would be planted along that foundation, I nearly had to call EMS to revive and resuscitate them! The distressing developments that followed included excavation of the entire stone path, a huge cement truck blocking Church Street for an afternoon so that cement could be poured into the foundation, and along the way, entire new conduit pipes were laid as all of the existing old mechanical lines buried next to the foundation had rusted and corroded! The house had emphatically directed me that the corridor garden was not meant to be the home of six Palm trees and I needed to develop a Plan B !!

I worked with the landscape/hardscape team of Lance Leader and his son when I designed and built my house in Kiawah and have been fortunate to have had their advice, experience and skills to bolster me through this rocky and, at times, distressing process. Lance introduced me to Coralina which is sliced sections of limestone resembling fossilized coral and suggested that it

might be a budget friendly option that would give me an appropriate base for my original concept of a tropical container garden, one that would complement the history of a house built during the “Barbados” era in Charleston. The walkway and the Coralina still needed some architectural interest and we needed to maintain access to, though camouflage, the newly laid conduit lines so I ordered some terracotta rope edging to line the path and frame my collection of terracotta pots and troughs. The corridor garden is almost complete and the containers are awaiting Hibiscus, Agapanthus, Papyrus and other tropical flowers and ferns which will be planted as soon as the winter chill leaves in early March!!

All of the stucco walls of the house were closely inspected and any cracks were repaired and filled.....with the dark filler material causing the walls of the house to take on zebra-like stripes. So, as an added “bonus”, I was compelled to re-paint the entire house! I have to confess that I loathed the original color: a muted, drab, peachy flesh tone which I couldn’t justify replacing because it had been done just four years before. In consultation with Skip Wallace of Island Architects, Renew Urban and their specialists in lime wash, as well as the enthusiastic support of April Wood at The Historic Charleston Foundation, we brought new warmth to the exterior of the house with a soft, pale yellow lime wash accented with white trim and aloe green for the doors and shutters. The perfect palette to launch a flower lover onto her next project....

And, three months later, I did finally install the single, elegant Pindo Palm and the grouping of three Windmill Palms....which brings us to the next chapter!

ADVENTURE II: The Front Courtyard Garden

Neighbors and passersby on the many tours that include Church Street have been stopping to examine the ruin and excavation that is currently taking place in the formal courtyard of my property. Loutrell Briggs had originally conceived the walled space in front of the house to be a parking court, most likely for the large house across the street whose ownership and history is said to be linked to my little house. He developed landscape and garden plans for both sites simultaneously and his notations on some of the drawings that I fortuitously found include swapping some shrubs and plants between the two properties. The 1990’s evolution of the area included planting grass in the parking court, adding a circular stone base in the center for a now absent urn, and adding a pair of pots with lemon trees against the long stucco wall that forms a boundary with the neighboring house. The pair of pots flanked a Maple tree that Briggs had intended to be small and ornamental but 40 plus years of unfettered growth had left it neither of those things; coupled with the gangly overhanging limbs of one of the gorgeous Oak trees that line Church Street, the formal grass courtyard had become deprived of sunlight, rendering it barren and weed infested. Following many efforts and multiple interventions with seed, sod and (dreaded) chemicals, I learned that the lack of sunlight had encouraged fungus infestation and

any remedial course needed to begin with reintroducing sunlight and removing as much of the infested soil as possible. The disintegration of my beloved English garden bench that had graced the courtyard---a last remaining holdover from my New Jersey rose gardens---was the sorrowful signal that the time had indeed come to bring new life to this tired and worn public space.

The courtyard was framed with old brick edging and ragged boxwoods but it was enough to appeal to the formal garden sensibilities that are at my core. I would design and install a parterre garden, just as Loutrell Briggs did in so many of his more elaborate properties, including the beautiful parterre garden across the street at 59 Church Street. However, I had to heed the message from the garden and remove what had caused all of this damage, namely the overgrown Maple tree and the many dead but overreaching limbs from the large street based Oak tree. Taking down the Maple caused me great distress but I know as a designer that editing is as important as what you add...be it in a room or in a garden. With the assistance of Charleston's Urban Forestry Department the Oak was carefully trimmed and, in fact, is much healthier in the long term with the abatement of these long, heavy limbs. The elegant Pindo Palm assumed the place of the Maple tree and now reigns supreme over the courtyard. Within a very short time there was an amazing and exuberant burst of growth from the surrounding beds of azaleas and hydrangeas as though the garden was affirming and rewarding this long overdue attention and action.

As I contemplated the renovation and restoration of the courtyard, my goals began to coalesce beyond just the concept of creating a parterre garden. One of my evolving beliefs was that while I wanted the garden to be fresh and contemporary in design, I also wanted to respect the lineage and legacy of the property's noted architects. I also wanted the design to complement and relate to the other garden spaces, even if in small ways...just as with the interiors of a home, I like and aspire to design spaces that are quietly cohesive and unified, both in style and function. Finally, with almost a full day of sunlight now warming the courtyard, I began to seize upon the possibility that I could grow roses once again.

A parterre garden is defined by its structure and this had to be deliberated, designed and submitted to both The HCF and BAR. I studied what formal gardens I could view from behind the iron gates and brick walls during my walks through Charleston as well as in books illustrating Briggs' designs. Many parterre gardens have a center axis and Briggs liked to employ some type of architectural element in his formal spaces so I chose to keep the circular center stone and add a columned pedestal with a bronze armillary where the missing urn had once stood. I ordered the same rope edging that I had just installed in the corridor garden, in this case in natural stone instead of terracotta. I also decided to return the pair of lemon trees in pots to the original location designated by Sheila Wertimer decades ago; the original trees are still alive and have been moved around the property but they will now be supporting players placed on each side of the Pindo Palm. Framed in miniature boxwoods, there will be four

planting quadrants divided by paths laid with oyster shells. I am, after all, now a southern gardener!

As the attached photos show, once we began the excavation, we got yet another unexpected “surprise”: there was a large stone cistern buried smack in the center of the courtyard! Cue from the house and property to develop another Plan B! Consulting with the growing team, it was decided that for both structural and historic purposes, the cistern could not be disturbed. Its width was almost exactly the diameter of the circular planting bed that was to host my elusive and treasured roses! Seasoned at this point to these regularly occurring surprises and messages, I managed to rebound without panic and have accepted the wise counsel (pleadings!) of Wallace and Leader that the rose bed was now destined to instead be a circular path around the armillary. I do remind myself and appreciate that these are luxury problems! The roses will now be relegated to the four planting quadrants and, while they may not hold center stage, there will be more space in the quadrants to plant a greater showing of them. And it gives me new creative garden choices to keep the adrenaline flowing at 3AM because the greater real estate offered by the quadrant beds will require more underplanting! Perhaps silver variegated Thyme or Silver Mounded Artemisia and Lamb’s Ear all of which have blue-green foliage that will complement the aloe green of the house trim and the new garden bench that I felt compelled to order from the same English craftsmen that made the original pair for my rose garden in NJ some 20 years ago!! Or, maybe I will underplant seasonally with delicate white annuals of Pansies, tiny Daisies or even Stock which also sports blue green foliage. I have until early March to mull all of these possibilities but then will need to prepare and plant because 62 Church Street will be featured on The HCF Spring Festival of Houses & Gardens in late March and early April. My SOB neighbors have endured the mess and congestion of this construction for the past 6 months so I hope that they will come by and enjoy the new garden and the beginning of its latest incarnation and evolution.

And, please stay tuned for Adventure III because at some point in the not too distant future, I expect that the house and garden will nudge me to finally tackle the enchanting but decrepit rear terrace garden....

Erika Hayes

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NOTE: As with any large scale renovation or construction project, success is almost always a function of having the support of a great team. I have two wonderful friends who are passionate gardeners and they have both counseled and cheered me through this at times daunting and frustrating undertaking. April Wood at HCF and the team of Andy Meihaus and Mark

Regalbutto of Renew Urban have been critical in their support and assistance, not to mention patience! Lance Leader and Jerry Poore will make my design dreams into a reality with their craftsmanship and beautiful plant material. Skip Wallace of Island Architects has provided not just the proper design and construction knowledge for the project but has also managed to deftly coax me into maintaining my own sense of scale, proportion and perspective (and thus sanity).