



Clipped boxwood hedges and pleached hornbeams divide this small property into distinctly designed garden rooms, making it seem much larger than it is.

A lush garden scene with a large green hedge, a lawn, and various plants and flowers. The text "SMALL SPACE, BIG PLAN" is overlaid in large white letters.

SMALL SPACE, BIG PLAN

A LANDSCAPE DESIGNER TRANSFORMS
HER HALF-ACRE YARD IN PRINCETON,
NEW JERSEY, INTO AN ELEGANT GARDEN.

by NICOLE JUDAY *Photography by* ROB CARDILLO

WHEN ELIZABETH WISLAR MOVED INTO A SMALL 1940s HOUSE IN PRINCETON IN 1999, SHE IMMEDIATELY CONJURED UP BIG PLANS FOR THE PROPERTY.

A designer of gardens and interior spaces, she imagined something tasteful, romantic, and beautiful. Her vision included transforming the flat half acre of lawn surrounding the house, which her mind's eye saw as the setting of a jewel—a lush, exquisitely proportioned garden filled with surprise and delight.

She even came up with a new name for the property. She christened it Boxwood Cottage, although not a single boxwood grew there, which made her the object of some good-natured ribbing from friends. “I know it’s not an English estate,” she admits, “and that people don’t give names to teeny spec homes in Princeton, New Jersey. But I also knew I wanted it to feel more elegant.” Boxwood Cottage was a highlight of the 2013 PHS garden tour.

CLEAN SLATE

An experienced plantswoman, Wislar had already spent 15 years honing her gardening skills on 5 wooded acres that surrounded her former home. “I knew nothing when I started there,” she says with a laugh. “I did everything wrong and killed a million plants, but I had a blast.” As fun as it was, caring for 5 acres is a lot for one person to handle, and she would sometimes pull in the driveway and sit in her car, feeling overwhelmed by all the work. The move was in part to downsize, and also to give her a blank canvas on which to create a new vision.

The canvas is now full, but the project required several years of research, planting, and construction before the property began to resemble the perfectly designed garden that had already flourished in her imagination. Wislar is attentive to every

Elizabeth Wislar is often accompanied by Mildred Paddington Gill II (informally called Millie), a Brussels griffon named after the designer’s grandmother.



ROW ONE 1. Yews and crape myrtles frame a small garden room. 2. The garden is a haven for birds and other wildlife, including these robin nestlings clamoring for a feeding. 3. The antique bronze doorknocker was a wedding gift from Wislar’s uncle.

ROW TWO 4. The bluish green foliage of Boxwood ‘Vadar Valley’. 5. Vines ensconce the studio where Wislar works out her designs. 6. ‘Coral Charm’ is her favorite peony.

ROW THREE 7. Purple clematis. 8. A window box of hosta, ferns, and ivy thrives in the shade. 9. A row of rocking chairs invites guests to sit, sip lemonade, and, in summer, watch fireflies flit over the garden.





The table under the backyard pergola, set for dinner with lichen place mats and floral-patterned china, reflects Wislar's botanically inspired interiors.



detail and nuance, an important trait for anyone designing a small garden, where every square foot counts and every space will be noticed. For a year, she studied the patterns of light and shadow on the new property and how water drained off and away from the house, and she worked on a series of drawings. While she loved boxwoods, harboring fond memories of them on her grandparents' Virginia property, she knew nothing about growing these evergreens, so she visited nurseries and gardens, sought advice from the American Boxwood Society, and read everything she could find about the various species and cultivars. (See "Best of the Boxwoods" on the opposite page for her favorite varieties.)

A deer fence for the backyard was the first major project she would tackle. It extends to the edge of house and provides a sanctuary for the plants within. Once installed, Wislar says, it made the yard look like a penitentiary, which was clearly not part of her grand vision. To hide the ugly mesh, she planted five climbing hydrangeas, which have now grown together so completely that visitors never realize that this deciduous screen is as functional as it is beautiful. The exposed front garden, outside the fence, contains only the most deer-resistant plants: daffodils, peonies, alliums, and of course plenty of boxwoods.

ROOMS TO GROW

Because each plant is integral to the overall design, the flow from border to lawn to formal bed feels seamless. Nothing is extraneous or unplanned. Here and there a boxwood is allowed an old-fashioned billow, but the majority of the garden is carefully structured, its elegant lines impeccably maintained, creating a sense of refined tranquility.

The landscape is also a testament to Wislar's commendable patience. One of her most exciting moments was when a planting of 'Justin Brouwers' boxwoods, spaced a foot apart, finally touched each other to form a hedge. "When I planted them, they were the size of softballs," she recalls. "Every year I thought, 'This is the year!' And then I'd have to wait again."

Partly inspired by visits to the nearby Grounds for Sculpture, in Hamilton, New Jersey, where particular sculptures serve as focal points in various areas, she subdivided the rest of the L-shaped yard into smaller sections, each one anchored with a central feature: a square of meticulously kept lawn, a birdbath, an obelisk, a clipped-boxwood topiary. Viewpoints have been carefully considered, and they gently entice the visitor deeper into the garden, which reveals itself slowly, step by step and room by room. These garden rooms create the illusion of a much larger piece of acreage while also disguising the relative flatness of the natural topography.

Since the house itself is small, the garden rooms double as an extension of the indoors. The dining room is only 10 feet by 11 feet—"the tiniest in the world," Wislar laments—so she designed a gravel area at the far corner of the grounds to be anchored by a sturdy pergola entwined with wisteria, under which she hosts frequent dinner parties. A low metal table close-by shelters one of the most whimsical features of the property: a doormat-size tapestry garden, out of which spill miniature Solomon's seal, astilbe, and hosta plants.

The rectangular space in the back that Wislar calls the croquet lawn is bordered by white-flowering plants such as 'Annabelle' hydrangeas, 'Festiva Maxima' peonies, and 'Sarah's Favorite' crape myrtles, all intended to glow in the moonlight and to reflect the light of 75 or more candles placed around the garden for elegant summer entertaining. And of course, there are boxwoods. The elongated foliage of *Buxus harlandii* is among the largest of all boxes but, like everything else selected for this garden, still invokes refinement. *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Bracken's Brown Beauty' stands court at one end of the lawn, another homage to the designer's Virginia grandmother.

BEST OF THE BOXWOODS

Boxwood is a slow-growing broadleaf evergreen shrub that has been popular as a garden plant since the 1600s. There are 90 boxwood (*Buxus*) species, which are native to Europe, northern Africa, and western Asia, and more than 200 cultivars are available commercially. Elizabeth Wislar grows about 25 varieties. Here are a few of her favorites.

B. microphylla* var. *japonica
'Morris Midget' is a tiny-leaved miniature.

B. harlandii is a particularly long-leaved species of larger stature.

'Green Mountain' (a hybrid of *B. sinica* var. *insularis* × *B. sempervirens*) has a natural pyramidal habit that is useful for adding vertical structure to the garden.

***B. microphylla* 'Curly Locks'** has very interesting, somewhat-twisted leaves.

For her more formal borders, Wislar's favorite choice is

***B. sinica* var. *insularis* 'Justin Brouwers'**, a Korean boxwood that keeps a tight and symmetrical habit. Besides an occasional dusting off of debris, it requires no maintenance, and because it's a slow grower, it doesn't need frequent pruning.

A shrub that Wislar loves but avoids is ***B. sempervirens* 'Suffruticosa'**, the classic English boxwood. "English boxwood broke my heart," she laments. She now prefers newer cultivars that can tolerate more sun and less-perfectly-drained soil than what English boxwood demands.

Boxwoods, admittedly, are susceptible to a range of pests and pathogens. Good culture, including thinning (not shearing) plants in the fall or winter to improve air circulation and stimulate new growth, is important for protecting against disease. Fallen foliage should be removed from around the plants in autumn, and pruning tools should be disinfected after working on any diseased plant, to prevent pathogens from spreading.

On the plus side? Boxwoods are extremely deer resistant, and their shallow roots make them easy to transplant.

VIEW POINTS

While many houses can seem randomly assigned to the patches of ground on which they were built, Wislar believes each window of a home should frame a picturesque outdoor setting and that the garden itself must embrace the home, creating an integrated aesthetic experience. Around many of the windows and doors of Boxwood Cottage, ivy and other vines drape like swag curtains or completely encircle the openings, echoing her thoughtfully framed collection of landscape paintings in the house. A connection to nature and beauty, Wislar says, "is what grounds us and replenishes us." Judging by the robins' nest above the front door, the Carolina wrens in the many birdhouses, and the finches at the kitchen window feeder, nature does appear to feel welcome here.

In a way, the tranquility of the garden is slightly at odds with Wislar's demeanor of sunny exuberance. She is tall and willowy, and her blue eyes widen when she describes her favorite 'Coral Charm' peony as gorgeous, outrageous, exquisite, and fabulous. She also uses these adjectives to describe many other features of a garden that often overwhelms her with its splendor. At one point she pauses in mid-rhapsody to acknowledge, "You'd think I'd have no breath left, since I'm always having it taken away by plants!"

When asked which is more rewarding, garden design or interior design, Wislar flashes a beguiling smile and insists that she loves both, passionately. "But plant people," she says, "they're the chosen ones. Their hearts are bigger; their minds are more open. I've had so much fun getting to know them. Gardeners are the salt of the earth." 🌿

A passionate home gardener, Nicole Juday writes for a variety of magazines and blogs. She manages the horticulture certificate program at the Barnes Arboretum in Merion, Pennsylvania.

For more information, go to boxwoodsociety.org.