



A TUSCAN *Retreat*



Outdoor luxury for
entertaining, relaxing and living

By Phyllis Gricus | Photos by Craig Thompson

THE MT. LEBANON HOMEOWNERS ADMIRER A STRIKING SCENE depicted on a thank you card they received. The photograph of a flowing fountain in a courtyard with a panoramic view framed between stone arches, was enchanting. They momentarily wondered—just where was that beautiful place? The realization that it was, in fact, a photo taken of their own courtyard amazed them. Indeed, they are both so thrilled with the completed renovations of their home and garden that they spent a recent vacation at home relaxing and enjoying the comforts they've worked to create. ✧ The creative mind behind the thank you card, and the renovations is J. David Wissel, of Wisselwood Ltd. Educated as a fine artist, Wissel turned his artful eye to architectural design, after being unable to earn a living as a sculptor. Since 1972, Wissel has been successfully guiding homeowners through the design process. Along with his partner Nick Taylor, Wissel also manages the construction process, serving as the general contractor.

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These new plantings help to emulate the beauty of a Tuscan garden, while being able to thrive in the climate of Western Pennsylvania.



After completing the interior renovations, Wissel and Taylor began work on the exterior spaces. Incorporated in the planning from the beginning was the idea of an outdoor room. Below a seamless, second-floor solarium addition is an open-sided gallery, called a loggia. This Italian architectural feature creates a close relationship between the house and the outdoors. In addition, the solarium addition with its stone arched base mirrored an existing loggia that is adjacent to a fountain courtyard. The two loggias in the garden are casual luxury defined: outdoor entertainment rooms with spectacular views.

Elegance and water

The original fountain and courtyard was in need of repair and the homeowners were considering building a pool in its place. That site proved unsuitable for a pool due to the location of a main drain. The layout that Wissel offered allowed for renovation of the fountain and courtyard, and furnished the pool the homeowners wanted in another nearby spot.

The design solution magnificently captures the beauty of the sloped terrain on the one-acre site. Stone walls at the lower elevation provide the foundation for the gracious formal style

pool. Terraced stairs now descend to the placid water below. And a colorful hillside garden surrounds it all.

Perched above the pool, the splash of the cascading water in the sunny courtyard is alluring, in sight and sound. The well-crafted fountain and courtyard summon the feel of an Italian villa. The inclusion of a Rumford fireplace (a historic masonry design that is heat efficient) for warm fires on chilly nights is only one example of the attention to detail paid.

The cherubic three-tiered fountain that replaced the original was artistically designed and rendered by Wissel. The sketches were then sent to Fine's Gallery for custom carving to his specifications. The completed fountain was shipped to the job site in three pieces. Installation of the fountain pieces, weighing in at about 2,000 pounds each, required the use of an 80-ton crane—and an entire day's work.

Structures like the fountain, walls and walkways are referred to in landscape design terms as hardscape. The hardscape features permanently define the space and establish the style of the garden. Planting trees, shrubs and flowers is the final step in creating an outdoor living space. Plants accentuate the aesthetic beauty of the built structures.

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OPPOSITE: Along with the second-floor solarium addition and loggia, an expansive deck area was created overlooking the pool. Towering trees and comfortable outdoor seating provide plenty of shaded seating.

LEFT: Situated to the far right of the courtyard, a Rumford fireplace keeps the outdoor space warm and well lit on chilly fall evenings.

BOTTOM LEFT: Reminiscent of those found in Italy, a cherubic fountain acts as the focal point to the courtyard. Installation of the massive fountain pieces required the use of an 80-ton crane.

BOTTOM RIGHT: The homeowners' affinity for the French and Italian country style drew them to the beautiful Normandy-style, stone home. The renovations, inside and out, have been in keeping with that style. The garden and outdoor rooms truly evoke the romance of Tuscany.





The plantings

I've had the great pleasure of being involved in this project as the landscape designer. My initial meeting with the clients, Wissel and the landscape contractor, Rich Barna of Greenleaf Landscaping, marked the beginning of a good collaborative working relationship.

Taking my cues from the architecture style of the built structures and the clients' preferences, I chose a plant palette that would emulate the enchanting beauty of a Tuscan garden—colorful and inviting—and thrive in the climate of Western Pennsylvania.

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Visitors to the home can lounge poolside and feel like they're relaxing at one of the most exclusive European spa resorts. Superb views of the pool area and beyond can be enjoyed from the solarium.



RESOURCES

Design and general contractor:

Wisselwood Ltd.

Stone contractor:

Petrelli Stone

Fountain:

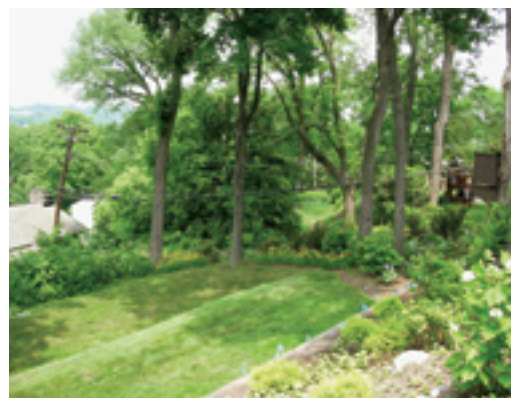
Fine's Gallery

Landscape designer:

Phyllis Gricus

Landscape contractor:

Greenleaf Landscaping



The trees are the anchors of the hillside plantings: Parrottia Persica, a small specimen tree with showy, exfoliating bark and outstanding fall color; Umbrella pine, a rare and unusual specimen conifer with great texture; Weeping Nootka False Cypress, with bluish-green foliage; and Tamukeyama Laceleaf Maple with dissected, crimson-red foliage. All were selected to add structure to the garden.

The shrub and perennial plantings, varied and numerous, have colorful blooms, foliage and fragrance. White groundcover roses tumble and weave through patches of poppies. Fragrant lavender set off against the soft, silvery foliage of lambs ears adds an interesting display of textures.

A prominent characteristic of a Tuscan garden is the use of planted containers. The homeowners had purchased a collection of outstanding terra cotta pots to complete the old-world style of the garden. I selected spiral juniper topiaries for planting in some of the pots for vertical accents to the area around the pool.

The other containers around the garden are planted with herbs and flowers. Two classic urns near the fountain have purple basil, rosemary, and oregano. The culinary herbs used here nod to the authentic flavor of Tuscany and were planted for their fragrance and foliage. Purple Bougainvillea was selected for another container, adding a bright splash of color to the fountain courtyard.

Although planted just last summer, the garden can be enjoyed at the present. It offers many lessons in design; showing that the outdoor space can be functional and attractive even while the living parts of the garden are just starting to evolve. It's important to note that beautiful mature gardens start with great beginnings—and this one is not to be missed. See it for yourself on this year's garden tour for the benefit of the Mt. Lebanon library. 🍷

Editor's note: The 17th annual Mt. Lebanon Garden Tour will be held on Sunday, July 15. The eight gardens open for your pleasure can be visited from 12-5pm. All proceeds are for the benefit of the Mt. Lebanon Public Library located at 16 Castle Shannon Blvd., Pittsburgh, PA 15228.

Tickets can be purchased at the library for \$12 in advance or for \$15 on tour day. If you can't get there, mail your request, along with a check and your tickets will be sent to you. For additional details call 412-531-1912, or visit www.mtlebanonlibrary.org.

TOP LEFT: Stone steps and walls lead from the loggia and courtyard down to the pool area. The tiered landscape is essentially cut into the hillside allowing each level to act as separate and distinct area.

TOP RIGHT: Before the addition of the pool and hardscaping, the property was mainly an empty, blank canvas. The inclusion of new plantings and thoughtful landscape design brings life and interest to the backyard property.