

GROW

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WATER'S EDGE

*The power and beauty
of our essential resource*

SNEAK
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FLOWER SHOW
p. 9



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OUTSIDE

Influences

A garden in the Philadelphia suburbs is inspired by its designer's childhood memories, world travel, and plant-wise peers.

by SARI HARRAR photographs by ROB CARDILLO

Sharee Solow prunes a *Hydrangea paniculata* bonsai.

Visitors

to the intensely planted gardens surrounding Sharee Solow's home in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, should expect to find the unexpected. A quaking bog sits out in her front yard. A mirror out back looks like the gateway to a mysterious wilderness. A rippling waterfall is a haven for bathing birds, and the bonsai collection on the patio is patrolled by a pair of cats.

Solow's garden even surprises her at times.

"As I planted *Sarracenia* (insect-eating pitcher plants) in the bog, a bumblebee flew into one plant while I was still holding on to it—and the bee never escaped!" says Solow, a landscape designer. Last summer, monarch butterfly caterpillars flocked to the milkweed in her burgeoning strip garden right next to the street, and she headed straight to a local nursery to buy a few more plants. "I've never had monarch caterpillars like this before," she says. "They were devouring everything. I wanted to keep them fed."

CREATIVE COLLABORATOR

Solow grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, as the daughter of an architectural draftsman and a thrifty homemaker who saved seeds from marigolds, zinnias, and portulacas in reused envelopes and medicine bottles to plant the next year. When she moved to Elkins Park with her husband 25 years ago, she was a theatrical-costume seamstress with a strong design sense and a sheriff's-sale house. As she transformed the rubble-strewn, poison-ivy-infested lot into distinctive gardens, the experience changed her too.

A Manchurian striped maple (*Acer tegmentosum*) overhangs the gate leading to the secluded, Japanese-inspired garden behind Sharee Solow's home. A cultivar of Japanese hydrangea vine (*Schizophragma hydrangeoides* 'Moonlight') envelops the wall to the right.



Clockwise from bottom left: Bees and monarch butterflies flock to a streetside planting of *Asclepias incarnata*; the display in the sunny front garden changes with the seasons and delights passersby; guests have called the backyard garden a "Japanese jewel box."

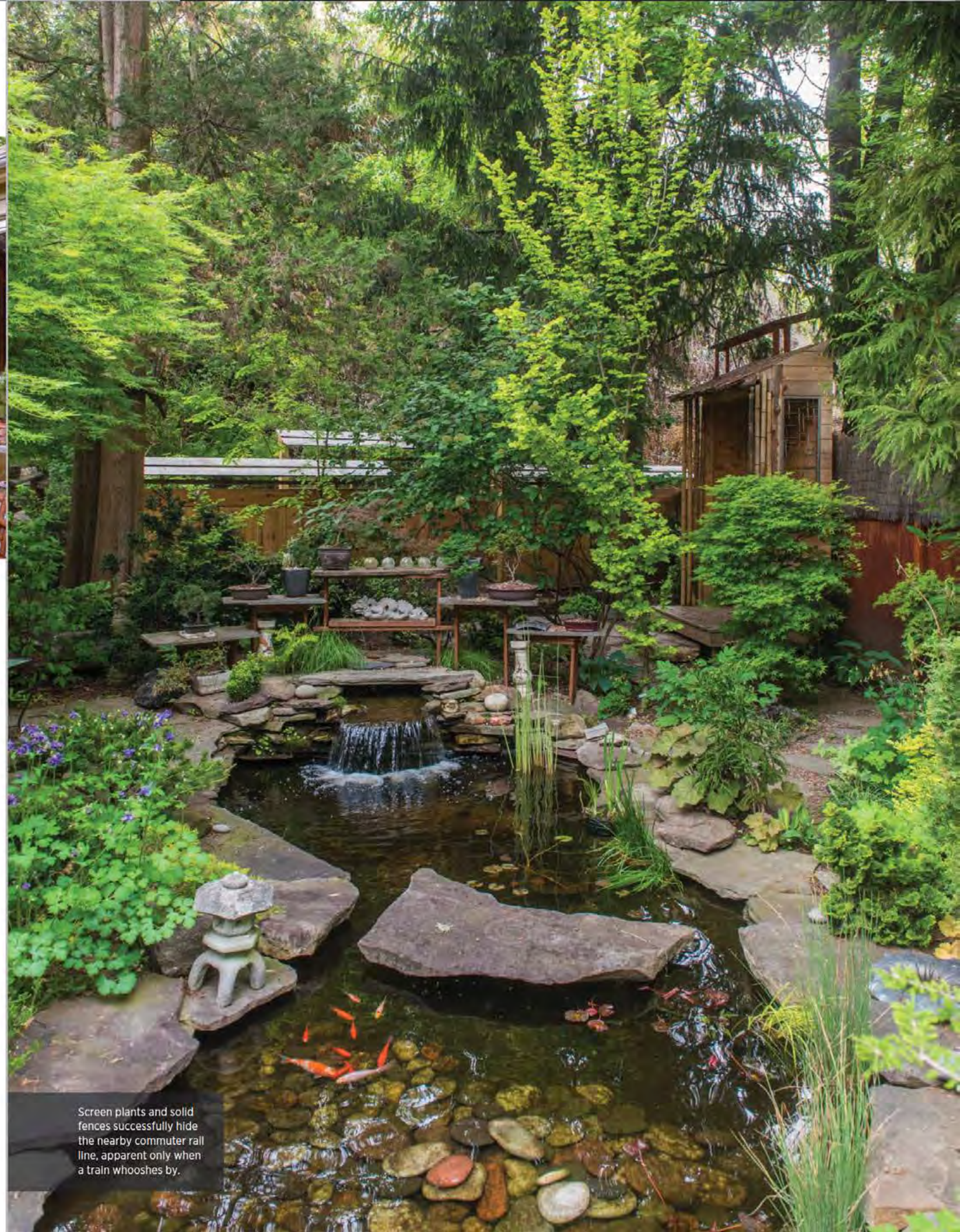


"I didn't know many people when we moved here, so I joined a local group working on creating High School Park; that was how I started down the landscape design path," says Solow as she sips a cup of hot cider in her light-filled kitchen while a batch of sourdough bread rises in a bowl on the counter. Shelves of plants soak up sunshine in big windows beside the kitchen table. Artistic metal sculptures of ants hang on one wall, next to a view of her Asian-inspired back garden.

Solow felt at home with the professional landscape plans a design firm drafted for the former high school property. "I thought, 'I can do that!'" she says, and as her interest in horticulture grew, she earned degrees in landscape architecture and horticulture from Temple University. She was encouraged by Marjorie Bayersdorfer, a local resident who spearheaded the park project. Meanwhile, she was learning plenty at home. "We didn't have poison ivy in Florida, and as I ripped it off the house, I ended up needing a prescription for steroids to control the rash," she remembers. "I hired someone to finish that part of the job!"

The experience and education led to a new professional career: developing landscape designs for commercial and residential properties through several Philadelphia-area contractors. "I really enjoy creating areas that a lot of people will see and experience," she says. "The way a path traverses a landscape, the positioning of benches and tables for lunch, the types of plants and the materials used all make a difference in how people feel and even in how they move. You walk more slowly on brick or gravel than you do on a concrete path."

Working on the park project fostered her passion for belonging to gardening and horticultural organizations. Solow is a member of the North American Japanese Garden Association, the Perennial Plant Association, the Association of Professional



Screen plants and solid fences successfully hide the nearby commuter rail line, apparent only when a train whooshes by.



5

Love-Your-Garden Strategies

Sharee Solow's abundant and easy-care perennial gardens burst with continually changing colors and textures. Here's her best advice for designing garden spaces with a personal touch.

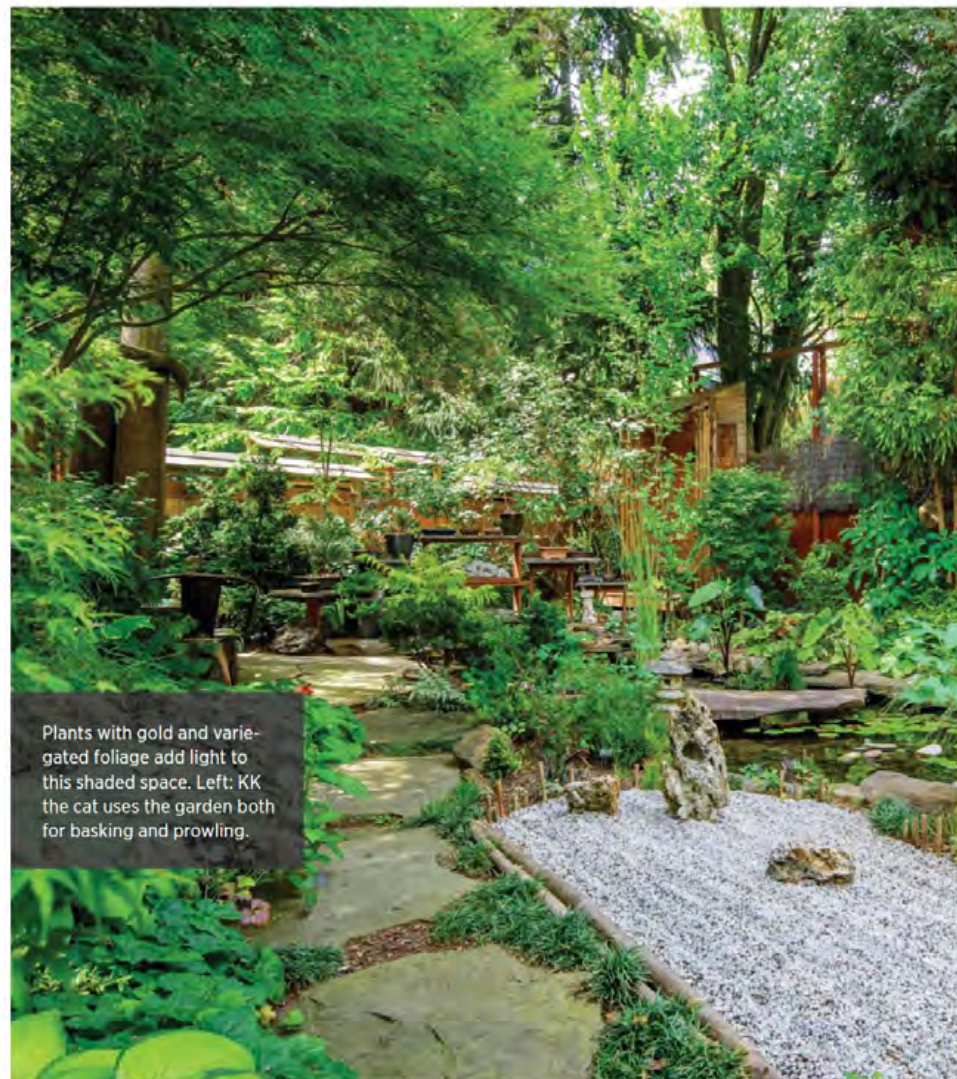
1 Include memory plants. Incorporate plants you loved from childhood gardens, but do it with a twist: "Look for cultivars that work in your garden space and growing conditions," she says.

2 Use every inch. Lawn? What lawn? Solow's property is all garden, including a full-sun curb strip packed with roses, milkweed, and other sun-loving, hardy plants. Giving up on grass makes maintenance easier by eliminating mowing and edging.

3 Give an experience. Add a water feature sized for your space. Reroute a path so it winds between destinations or is anchored by design elements like a fragrant shrub or a bench. Instead of concrete, consider materials that encourage a slower stroll. Paving stones, gravel, and bricks are good choices.

4 Be ruthless with the bad. "In my curb-side garden, several times I've had to rip things out that ended up taking over," Solow says. She's removed trees that proved to be too messy, including a plum that exuded sticky sap and dropped leaves and mushy fruit, and regularly prunes trees and shrubs so they stay within the bounds of her small space.

5 Add more of what's good. "My side garden is a jungle, and I love it," she says. "I keep adding things to it that I discover and really like."



Plants with gold and variegated foliage add light to this shaded space. Left: KK the cat uses the garden both for basking and prowling.



Above: The leaves of a fastigiate golden elm (*Ulmus x hollandica* 'Wredei') glow in the sunlight. Top left: Tucked far into a corner of the garden is a re-creation of a Japanese *koshikake machiai*, where guests would wait before being invited into a tea ceremony. Top right: The young trees of a bonsai beginner ornament the rustic tables as they await their next pruning.

Landscape Designers, and the Northeast Organic Farming Association, among other groups, and is a certified horticulturist with the Pennsylvania Landscape & Nursery Association. She volunteers at the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's information booth at the PHS Philadelphia Flower Show, offering advice about perennials and often sketching impromptu solutions to visitors' garden dilemmas. She's a frequent speaker for professional landscape organizations and local garden societies on topics such as noteworthy new perennials, building rock gardens or raised-bed bog gardens, and designing garden paths.

"We all have different strengths, and working together with other people on projects leads to better outcomes," she explains. "It also gives you a big circle of friends with expertise. Before buying a plant, I'll ask for advice online—sometimes while I'm at the nursery—to be sure it's the right species and cultivar for my garden conditions. If you're part of a plant identification chat room or other gardening groups, you can get a lot of useful, trustworthy information that way."

This process worked for her before she purchased *Daphne genkwa*, a shrub that has narrow leaves and a profusion of purple blooms in spring and is now featured in her billowing front garden. "I found one in a nursery in Maryland and texted a picture to some colleagues," she says. "It turned out to be a great plant."



INSPIRATION FROM HOME AND ABROAD

Solow's front- and side-yard gardens include ever-changing displays that are the public face of the property. "I post pictures on Facebook," she says, "and people on their way to the Elkins Park train station walk by and check out what's in bloom."

The back garden is serene and private. Trips to Japan, Vietnam, and other parts of Asia—often with her husband, a concert cellist—ignited Solow's interest in the elements of Asian horticultural and landscape aesthetics that infuse this space. "One key element in Japanese garden design is water," she says, and she created a feature in which water cascades off a low, wide rock into a central pool that is home to colorful koi. The resulting water music fills the space but does not overwhelm it. "It's important to choose the right water feature for your garden," Solow says. "If your garden is small, you want something that fits the scale—as if it were a small, natural brook and not a big, tumbling mountain stream. It shouldn't be too large or too loud."

Wooden walls surround the garden. In one area, bamboo fencing is cut to resemble a mountain range that includes Mount Fuji, the tallest peak in Japan. In another, tree trunks frame a large mirror that reflects the image of the landscape to add depth to the 30-by-50-foot space. Nearby is a small teahouse adjacent to a mini forest of young potted bonsai trees atop benches. "I've been working on bonsai for 10 years, and I'm still very new at it," she says. "It can be an obsession. I'm always looking for the right trees at nurseries and even on landscape job sites when contractors will be removing old plantings. You need a thick trunk and good *nebari*—the flare of roots at the surface. Then you train and prune. Every bonsai has a story to tell, and it takes time to develop."

Among the carefully chosen plants in the back garden are a columnar golden elm (*Ulmus x hollandica* 'Wredei'), which has bright-yellow foliage in the fall, and a Manchurian striped maple (*Acer tegmentosum*), with dramatic black-and-white bark. She also planted a southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora* 'Bracken's Brown Beauty') that evokes her Florida childhood. "It's important to have memory plants you really love," she says. "And you don't have to push the zones with something that might not survive where you live now. If you look, you can find a cultivar that works in your area. This magnolia blooms late; I never have to worry about frost killing the blooms."

By choosing plants that offer pleasant reminders of her childhood and her world travels—while making certain that the specimens she loves will thrive in her particular spot on earth—Solow melds deep experiences and no-nonsense practicality into a garden that is both beautifully evocative and eminently successful. 🌿

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