

Landscape Artist Offers Urbanites A Quiet Refuge

by Deborah Miller

It's been a long, hard work day. You fight the traffic to get home, only to find that there are dishes in the sink, the dog needs to be walked, and the house is a mess. Wouldn't you love to "get away from it all"? For most of us, though, beating a quick retreat to the country just isn't practical. But who says you have to leave home to get away?

Creating serene, Japanese-inspired gardens in small urban yards is a growing business for Boston landscape artist Bruce Applebaum. His spare, soothing refuges are designed to fit into their natural surroundings and also reflect the individual client's concept of nature.

Applebaum established his landscaping firm, Garden of Earthly Designs, in 1982 for the purpose of creating "unique and personalized gardens." Although he emphasizes a design approach that "addresses each client with respect to their vision of natural setting," Applebaum will gladly give suggestions to clients whose thumbs are less than green.

Applebaum received his Bachelor of Science degree in Wholistic Environments from Empire State College in New York. As a student, Applebaum devised his own program which enabled him to travel and study in Japan and throughout New England.

His diverse coursework included philosophy, solar energy and horticulture, and his environmental study sites began

at the college in New Paltz and then onto the New York Botanical Gardens and Arnold Arboretum. Finally, Applebaum went to the Zen Temple Gardens in Kyoto, where he worked as a landscaper's apprentice for 10 months.

"In Japan I learned to work with small areas of space and to create contemplative retreat environments," said Applebaum. "I am always looking to express little retreats in urban areas."

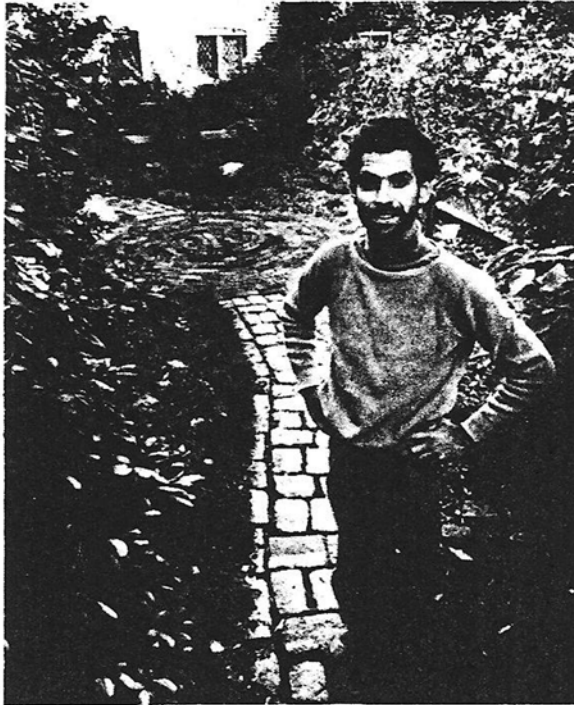
Boston is a unique urban setting because of its historical relevance, said Applebaum. "Cobblestones, for example, are not indigenous to Japan or to the Midwest," he said. "They are very New England."

In keeping with his Wholistic training, Applebaum likes to incorporate local artifacts and materials into his gardens. For a Warren Avenue client, for example, Applebaum had the opportunity to use cobblestones and antiques in the design of one of his unique retreats.

Applebaum likes to draw out from the client what they want. "I have catalogues of plants," he said, "and I like to use objects from the house that might enhance and personalize the garden."

"I am also extremely conscious of the outdoor space itself because I want to create a garden that fits into its environment such as an Old Boston feeling."

South End resident Claire Barden, who hired the landscape artist to re-do her backyard,



Green of thumb is Bruce Applebaum, who specializes in creating serene urban gardens to sooth city nerves. His company, Garden of Earthly Designs, turns gritty cityscapes into small countrysides. (Rose Marston)

praises Applebaum's personal, sincere and sensitive qualities.

"I had many quotes for the cost of a new garden," she said, "but the minute Bruce walked

the door, I liked him.

"It was an immediate, good feeling. The ideas about my garden just evolved naturally," she said.

"Overall, it was a very nice experience and he designed exactly the garden I wanted."

"I had seen a garden I adored on West Newton Street a few years ago and wanted a similar one which would look like it had always been there," Barden said.

"Bruce listened to me and made his own suggestions so that the change was a shared idea."

The Warren Avenue retreat is serene yet vibrant with color. It incorporates a variety of decorative trees, plants and shrubs so that it maintains an array of colors all year round, according to Applebaum.

He planted Japanese maples and evergreens which would stay small and not overgrow the garden. These greens are complimented by purple flowers, low lavender plants, peach-colored magnolia flowers and red roses.

To cover the surrounding fence there are hanging bittersweet, red maple and sergeant's crab. Also on the back wall of the brownstone, a year round fruit crabapple tree is dominant.

Barden and Applebaum planned the layout of this magnificent garden together. It was Barden's idea to maintain the circle of red bricks in the middle of the space and Applebaum suggested integrating the cobblestones to create a flowing walkway.

Applebaum describes Barden's retreat as a garden of "historical relics." "Claire had a lot

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of old brownstone ornaments and antiques in her house that I chose to integrate into the design scheme of the garden," he said.

A hot air register fits into the doorway and an old cemetery stone is used as a low sitting bench. Applebaum also placed two old iron grates into the basement windows which face the garden.

A piece of marble from an old mantelpiece is embedded on the ground and serves as the focal point of the garden, Applebaum said. The white contrasts with the red bricks and red bark from the sango-kaku tree, he added.

In designing this garden, Applebaum said he was inspired by the Isabel Gardner Museum.

"The Gardner Museum integrates many old ornaments," he said. "Pieces from European buildings are brought back and used throughout the garden and inside the building."

In addition to capturing each property's unique beauty, restoring its space, and respecting the individual client's needs, Applebaum provides low maintenance

and concentrates on a four seasonal approach.

"I want to create a garden which the owner can easily maintain and enjoy its beauty year round," he said. "My gardens must have character in the winter as well as the summer and spring."

"I specifically choose plants that can be kept with low maintenance," he added. "As an urban landscaper, I must take into consideration plants that may die because of pollution or trees that overgrow their space because they weren't chosen properly."

Applebaum stresses planning a garden that will fit its environment and last 10 to 20 years. He also emphasizes that the fall's cool temperatures are conducive to proper planting.

"Right now roots are developing and there's a lot of growth in the ground," he said. "It's a good time to get a head start for spring. There is natural moisture in the earth which is ideal for starting plants."

Aside from his private landscape design business, Applebaum wants to become more involved with public planting and related zoning laws.

"I would like to see a zoning

variance for greens," he explained. "A certain amount of space in the environment planned for greenery. We must respect nature within a city and there should be zoning areas where people can feel refreshed by greenery."

Applebaum notes that Boston is in a great period of growth. In the future he would like to be available for providing information on low maintenance and proper urban planting.

"It's a simple notion," Applebaum said. "I believe every street deserves a certain amount of both living and green space, an overall more refreshing environment."