

a Crescendo of

Summer Color



The von Trapp garden abounds with contrasts from layers of perennials, annuals, grasses, and shrubs. Here, *Amsonia hubrichtii*, *Filipendula rubra* 'Venusta', and *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Huron Sunrise' provide height and fine texture, while *Crocasmia* 'Lucifer', *Allium sphaerocephalon*, *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm', *Phlox paniculata* 'Becky Towe', and yellow daylilies (*Hemerocallis* sp.) contribute vivid color.



Reaching peak brilliance in the dog days of summer, the dazzling ornamental beds at a family-owned Vermont nursery offer design inspiration for gardeners everywhere.

BY CHARLOTTE ALBERS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DENCY KANE

WITH VIEWS to the Green Mountains in northern Vermont's Mad River Valley, the von Trapp Greenhouse is both an award-winning retail nursery and garden destination. The greenhouse is known for offering a wide selection of perennials, annuals, herbs, and vegetables—all grown onsite from seeds, cuttings, and divisions. The nursery, which was recognized as Retailer of the Year in 2013 by the Vermont Nursery and Landscape Association, includes a lush, half-acre display garden designed to showcase unusual plant combinations and celebrate the changing beauty of the landscape.

In summer, the expansive mixed borders explode with color and texture created by eclectic combinations such as feathery pink, white, and red astilbe (*Astilbe japonica*) and pink queen of the prairie (*Filipendula rubra* 'Venusta') in bloom, punctuated by the bright blue blossoms of agapanthus (*Agapanthus* sp.) and mixed contain-



The setting for the von Trapp gardens incorporates scenic views of the Green Mountains, top, and a neighbor's iconic red dairy barn, above.

TOP: COURTESY OF TOBIAS VON TRAPP

ers filled with blue pansies (*Viola* spp.) and autumn fern (*Dryopteris erythrosora*). In another bed, tall, dark-leaved *Cordyline australis* 'Black Knight' mixes it up with purple coneflowers (*Echinacea purpurea*), *Baptisia australis* 'Purple Smoke', yellow daylilies (*Heemerocallis* sp.), and black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm'). Elsewhere, pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*) and purple kale (*Brassica oleracea* 'Redbor') mingle with blue fescue grass (*Festuca glauca*).

The von Trapp display garden has become a must-see for many gardeners living in or traveling to the Northeast. "They've set the bar high for all of us in the nursery trade," says Sarah Salatino, owner of Full Circle Gardens, a perennial nursery in Essex, Vermont. "It's one of the best display gardens in the state. The design skillfully includes mountain views into a garden setting, and it's a great example of an easy-care garden in its maturity."

MODEST BEGINNINGS

Tobi and Sally von Trapp started growing vegetables in 1980 on their homestead located on a former cow pasture, part of the family dairy farm in Waitsfield, Vermont, where Tobi grew up. "It's in my genes," he



Tobi and Sally von Trapp with granddaughter Lily, who shares their love of plants.

says. "Both of my grandfathers were big gardeners." One of those grandfathers was also Georg von Trapp, an Austrian naval officer whose escape from Nazi persecution in 1938 with his musically gifted family was dramatized in *The Sound of Music*.

The von Trapps' interest in growing vegetables soon inspired other plans for

their property. The couple began adding greenhouses and cold frames, and eventually they started selling plants they and their staff propagated at the nursery.

Tobi began working on the display gardens in 1992. In preparation for planting, he fortified the soil in a pasture field for about four years, tilling and replanting green manure cover crops of buckwheat and winter rye. Now, 37 years after the first vegetable garden, he has created an exuberant landscape that dazzles anyone who experiences it during peak bloom in summer. His goal was "to show that this level of beauty is accessible and doable in any backyard. I started with a small collection of plants and kept dividing, and eventually had a big inventory to work with."

A RELAXED APPROACH TO DESIGN

So how did Tobi go about designing this stunning garden? "There was no plan," he admits, adding, "I just set out hoses on the ground." In this case, instinct and serendipity proved to be good partners.

A loosely symmetrical arrangement of beds flanking a central gravel path leads to a circular fountain built from local stone at one end and a latticed pergola at the op-

posite end. Secondary paths allow visitors to get closer views of the beds. The soil excavated for the paths was added to the beds, giving them a raised contour.

When it came time to bring herbaceous plants into the picture, Tobi eyeballed locations, and set the plants out in drifts. Plants are not labeled because, he explains, he wants to "impact people on an emotional and spiritual level." In fact, he has an unusual technique for visualizing his plantings. "When setting things out, I squint to blur my vision. That way, I'm seeing loose shapes of color and form," he says.

The anchor plants are Tobi's favorites—all of them tough American native species adaptable to the garden's USDA Hardiness Zone 4/AHS Heat Zone 3 location with its high elevation and exposure to wind and winter cold. Among them are blue false indigo (*Baptisia australis*), black cohosh or bugbane (*Actaea*

This mixed pot of pansies and autumn fern and the large pot of agapanthus behind it add splashes of blue by the garden's pergola.

simplex 'James Compton'), and eastern bluestar (*Amsonia tabernaemontana*). These are combined with woody shrubs such as lilacs (*Syringa* spp.), panicle hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata*), and the ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*) cultivar 'Seward' (Summer Wine®).

All these plants have proven to be durable and stellar performers. Clumps of blue false indigo are still vigorous two decades after being planted, and Hubricht's bluestar (*Amsonia hubrichtii*) forms large, airy mounds throughout the beds, turning from green to gold as days shorten. Black cohosh and astilbe have also thrived and filled in around other plants.

A CHANGING PALETTE

Since the beginning, the garden has been a work in progress and a testament to lessons learned from trial and error. "We've experimented with just about everything you can imagine," says Tobi. "If you combine the right plants, you can have plants that emerge early and then fade away as a second group of plants starts to grow."

Here in northern New England, snow can persist on the ground until early May,



Large mounds of Hubricht's bluestar (*Amsonia hubrichtii*), foreground, planted decades ago, are still thriving in the von Trapp garden.





Top: Grouped together, containers of ferns, begonias, coleus, purple shamrock (*Oxalis* sp.), and other tender plants create the look of a garden bed but can be brought into a greenhouse in winter. **Above:** Containers of yellow lantana, dahlias, hostas, daylilies, and lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*) help brighten the beds around the garden's stone fountain.

and the growing season is short, so Tobi uses a wide variety of plants. The peonies, baptisias, and irises of spring give way to the peak blooms of summer plants, with annuals such as zinnias, cleomes, and salvias continuing to shine into early fall.

Hydrangeas help extend the garden's dramatic display with blossoms that change color as they mature over a period of six to eight weeks. Midsummer stand-outs include 'Limelight' panicle hydrangea and Invincibelle Spirit ('NCHAr'), a relatively new cultivar of smooth hydrangea (*H. arborescens*) favored for its rosy hues.

Visiting the Garden

The von Trapp Greenhouse is located at 208 Common Road in Waitsfield, Vermont. (802) 496-4385. www.vontrappgreenhouse.com.

■ The greenhouse is an onsite retail nursery. It and the display gardens are open to the public from spring to early fall. Check the website for current hours of operation.

Similarly, 'Huron Sunrise' maiden grass (*Miscanthus sinensis*), a cold-hardy selection that is not invasive in northern climates, contributes height and fine texture to the borders all season, then produces showy burgundy flower plumes in late summer. In fall, the green leaves turn an attractive tan.

Agapanthuses, dahlias, and other frost-sensitive plants grown in containers are moved around to add visual interest where needed as the display beds change with the seasons. "I'll take annuals and punch them into openings," says Tobi. "I want as much color as I can get out there with the least amount of effort."

With something always to see from spring to fall, the von Trapp Greenhouse offers plenty of ideas for getting the most out of your garden, as well as encouragement to experiment with abandon. "The world needs more beauty," says Tobi. "I want to show how we might impact the little spaces we have and inspire people to become stewards of the land."

Charlotte Albers is a garden designer living in Shelburne, Vermont.