

## June Gardening Guide

# Rooms of His Own

By Cynthia Brian

*"The only limit to your garden is at the boundaries of your imagination." —Thomas D. Church*



*A bricked flowerbed filled with red carpet roses, Asian lilies, and a cast iron lantern.*

*Photos Cynthia Brian*

From the street, the white Lamorinda ranch-style house of Michael Curtis belies the magnificence waiting to be discovered beyond the garden gates. A collector of all things cast off and cast iron, Curtis converts salvaged junk into artistic architecture that transforms his garden into an alluring adventure of discovery.

His grandfather founded L. N. Curtis and Sons Fire Protection and Emergency Response Equipment in 1929 and throughout Curtis' life he has accumulated firefighting memorabilia. Curtis' father introduced him to collecting rocks, minerals, glass and old bottles as they explored abandoned mines and ghost towns together. As a boy, one of Curtis' favorite jaunts was hiking the railroad tracks where he'd pick up discarded telegraph insulators. When he'd find anything that was made of cast iron, he was especially excited. All of these treasures were stored and as he traversed the globe as an adult, he added to his compilation. His heartfelt dream was to one day create a secret garden where all of his

unusual trinkets would dance with the most colorful flowers in perfect harmony.

With his love of the English countryside, his first home boasted an English cottage garden, complete with an authentic red phone booth. In 2001, he moved that phone booth along with his beloved remnants from his industrial revolution fascination to a small house on an acre of land filled with diseased and dying trees. After removing 55 eucalyptus trees, Curtis enriched the soil, and without any written plan or design schematic, began work on his inspired masterpiece using his vision and intuition as guides.

Smooth stones lead through a lush lawn to the iron arbor covered in the sunset oranges and reds of Joseph's coat and flanked by white Alba tree roses. Chimes, bells and hummingbird feeders dangle from the arch while a variety of birdhouses perch on poles, nesting birds darting in and out. Rows of telegraph insulators lining the path are accentuated by two hand painted manhole covers, gifts from a trip

to Japan. With the flip of a switch, the insulators illuminate like Christmas lights.

Color is a driving force in the garden and the combination of textures and forms is mesmerizing. Curtis built brick retaining walls and planters, filling them with an enormous diversity of rainbow flora including camellias, roses, impatiens, lilies, Daphne, birds of paradise, gerbera daisies, lobelia, salvia, pansies, violets, canna, petunias, daisies, lavender, foxglove, nasturtium and a variety of bushes, boxwoods, and shrubs. The tranquil sounds of cascading water emanate from the nine fountains scattered throughout the property. Whether one turns right or turns left, an eclectic wood or metal gate directs attention to a divergent garden room sectioned by a growing privet fence and festooned with artifacts from Curtis' escapades to estate sales, fairs, salvage yards, and years of walking the rails. He even built a tree house from reclaimed barn wood adding a ladder, an antique loggers saw and vintage signs discovered in the Gold Country. An abandoned test missile rests against the fence awaiting its proper placement.

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*A red and blue painted vintage fire hydrant set among the impatiens and plantings.*