

LESSON #1

Use hardscape, such as a stone or brick patio or wooden deck, to define a space.

THIS PHOTO Lee Dunn greets visitors to her Atlanta garden from her potting shed, where a climbing hydrangea hugs the structure, softening its straight lines and helping to blend it into the garden.

DIVIDE & CONQUER

An Atlanta couple shares a few lessons they picked up for creating a series of garden rooms on a large property.



LESSON #2

Consider the tried-and-true structural borders of walls, fences, trellises, and “borrowed” elements, such as two buildings that form a natural alleyway or secluded space, or a neighbor’s house or fence.

They never set out to design the sprawling property surrounding their Atlanta home into a compact network of stunning garden rooms. Instead, Mike and Lee Dunn let nature be their guide and just went along for a pleasurable ride. By trusting their instincts, they succeeded in giving each themed area of the 3-acre tract its own function and look.

“This whole thing was really very easy because we let the land dictate where we put each of the garden rooms,” Lee says. “The woodland at the very back of the property lent itself to a natural shade garden. On the side of the house, a shady area became the white garden because nothing wakes up a dark area better than pops of white blooms.”

And so it went over the past 18 years as the couple—bitten by the gardening bug later in life—continued to build a garden without a landscape plan, one section at a time.

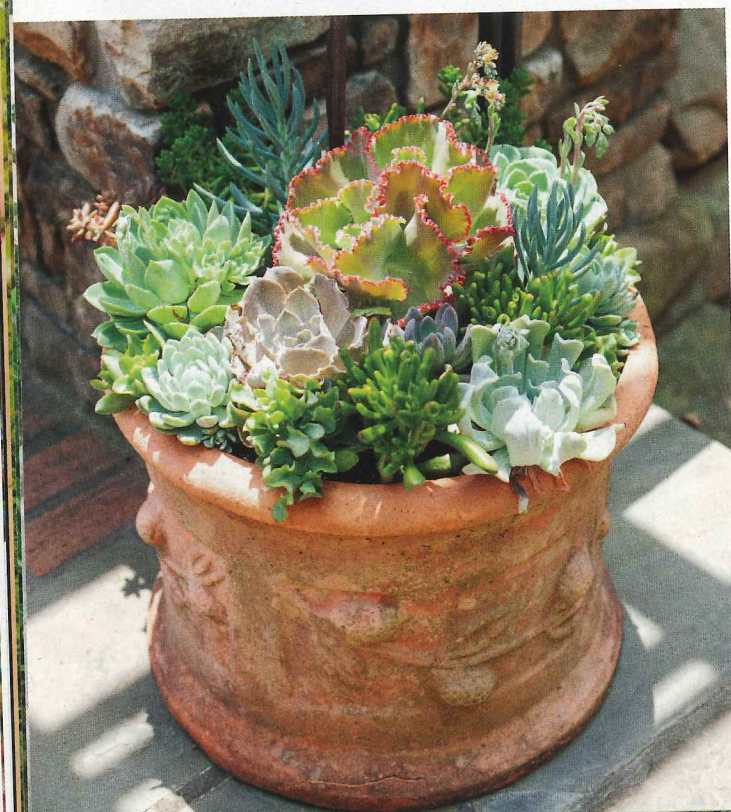
ABOVE Flanked by fragrant gardenias, a pergola topping the white picket fence makes for an inviting entrance to the kitchen garden. In the back corners of the garden, a birdhouse and an antique Belgian aviary, surrounded by herbs and perennials, provide accents.

RIGHT The rear of the property is dominated by a shade garden spilling with hydrangeas, ferns, and hostas.



LESSON #3

Rely on natural changes in elevation—or create your own—to define entrances and exits to a space. A couple of steps up or down between two areas can direct the eye and foot.



Although they sought help with planting decisions from landscape designer Tim Stoddard, the Dunns took their own divide-and-conquer approach in taming the acreage.

Many of their design decisions also were driven by practical challenges—the biggest being the constant droves of pesky deer, which devoured everything they planted the first few years. “We simply could not keep up with them because the property was so large,” Lee says.

The Dunns thought a picket fence in the front yard would fortify their entry garden; undeterred, the deer simply jumped over it. By adding a pergola over the fence, the couple not only solved the problem but also created a cozy “welcome garden” ideal for growing colorful perennials and displaying their extensive collection of garden art and vintage accents.

ABOVE Lee and Mike Dunn relax near the outdoor kitchen they created from a naturally recessed area in the backyard. A fireplace lends a sense of enclosure to the space, creating a cozy sitting area. The coffee table in front of the hearth was made from an old railroad cart. **LEFT** A terra-cotta pot, filled with *Kalanchoe*, sedums, and other succulents, is just one of many container gardens accenting the Dunns’ sprawling garden.



LESSON #4

Look up.
Partially enclose
a room with
open structures
such as wooden
arbors and
pergolas.



They liked the architectural feature so much that they repeated it at their back entrance, where intense sunlight proved ideal for growing herbs. Nestled between the house and garage, this space became a natural kitchen garden.

Adjacent to that area, a troublesome sloped area lent itself to creating a sunken garden room that, with the help of an outdoor fireplace, rock walls, and fire pit, became the perfect outdoor kitchen.

It wasn't long before the Dunns discovered that slopes and varying terrain levels help guide spaces for garden rooms, too. Take that steep valley on a far side of the house that few visitors ever see. Being a flower lover, Lee wanted to create a cutting garden, but, like most gardeners, disliked robbing her landscape of the bright blooms. So the couple sited a garden room just for the growing of cut flowers in the discreet low spot.

ABOVE RIGHT The back patio is a perfect spot for dinner and is within handy reach of the kitchen. **ABOVE LEFT** Vintage watering cans rest on an old garden bench in the kitchen garden, where one of Lee's favorite pink hydrangeas is in full glory. **LEFT** Red geraniums spill from circa-1890 French buckets mounted on conveyor belt chains, forming an eye-catching vertical display of container gardens.




LESSON #5

Create breathing room in a busy garden by including a quiet area of lawn or groundcover.

ABOVE A cozy arbored bench invites visitors to relax and take in the garden from its semiprivate vantage point. **BELOW** Generously proportioned containers of evergreens and annuals and an antique rocking horse accent a corner of the patio.

Even the backyard evolved into a private room as the Dunns used wide perennial beds, the house, and garage to frame a lush sunny lawn. "The grass lets the eye rest, in contrast to the busy perennial borders," Lee says.

The textured borders provide a colorful backdrop for the Dunns' many garden antiques, salvaged pieces, and rustic arbors, fences, and railings, all of which complement their home's informal architectural style. Though only 20 years old, the house has a cottagey feel, which Lee chose to repeat in a charming potting shed, complete with board-and-batten siding and shake shingle roof—yet another example of allowing the setting to drive the design and create aesthetic continuity.

"If you let the landscape tell you," she says, "it will help you make decisions that look totally natural." 

For more information, see Resources on page 110.



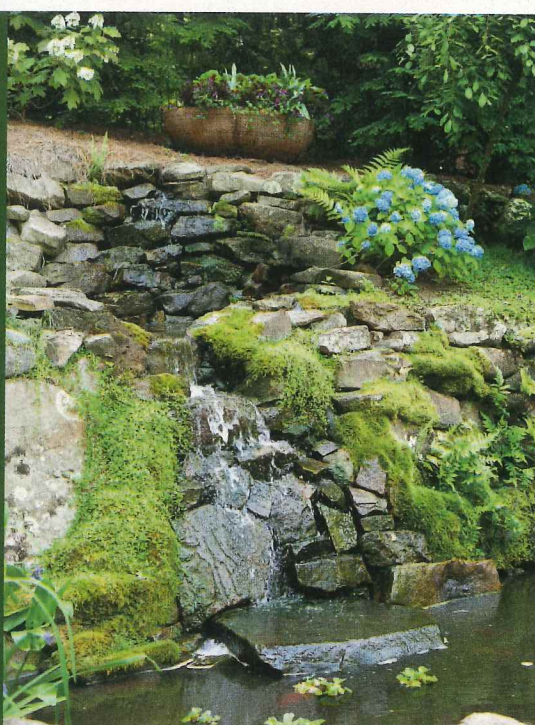


LESSON #6

Make the enclosure natural by planting hedges (whether formal or informal) of shrubs, trees or grasses, or planting borders of annuals and perennials.

LESSON #7

Use water as a defining element, making the swimming pool its own room or creating water features such as waterfalls or water walls to help define an area.



ABOVE LEFT Soft light filters through a curtain of weeping bald cypress, creating a sense of enclosure on one side of the patio. White hydrangeas and creeping groundcovers fill out the border. **ABOVE RIGHT** A waterfall spills into a small koi pond with waterfall beside the driveway, lending a tranquil sound. **BELOW** A winding gravel path snakes its way through the shade garden with charming rustic accents along the way, such as an old bicycle with its basket converted to a planter.

