

Photos: Helen Norman



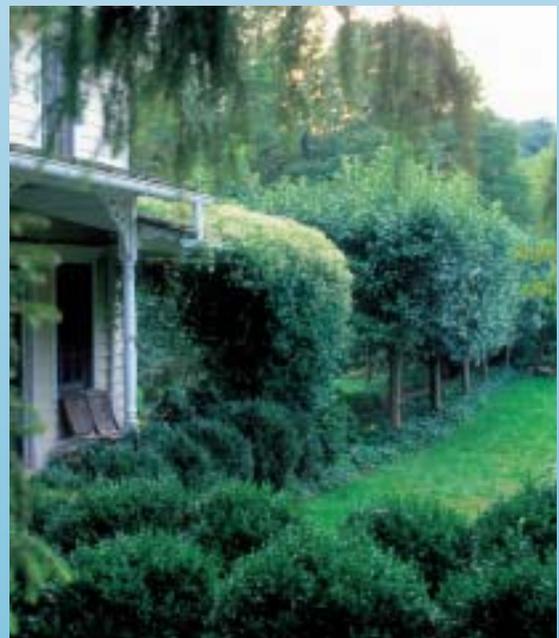
JON CARLOFTIS: GARDENING GURU TAKES GARDENS TO NEW HEIGHTS

Carloftis designed acres of garden for his childhood home in Laurel County, Kentucky.

By Robin Roenker

You never know what you might find in a garden designed by Jon Carloftis. Junipers and boxwoods are as apt to mingle amidst common daffodils, black-eyed Susans, daylilies, and even marigolds as with plants of more aristocratic sounding names like nasturtium, verbena, or ajuga.

That's as true at the gardens he's designed for UK's Arboretum or his family's home in Livingston, Ky., as it is for the New York City rooftop apartments of film celebrities like Julianne Moore (*"The Forgotten"*), Edward Norton (*"The Italian Job"*), and writer, director and actor M. Night Shyamalan (*"The Sixth Sense"*).



The home of Jon Carloftis in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, has a tree-lined allée.

FIRST STEPS TO DESIGNING A GARDEN

1. **Create small “rooms” and finish them. Trying to tackle a larger space can be overwhelming. “Start with the little area right by the house and then go from there,” says Carloftis.**
2. **Do research to discover what you like. “It’s like a car, don’t just buy the first thing you see on the lot,” Carloftis says.**
3. **Don’t be afraid to fail. “The great thing about working outside is, if it doesn’t work this year, you’ve got next year. Get out and try it, and you’ll have fun and learn,” Carloftis says.**

“I’m not a plant snob,” says the soft-spoken Carloftis. “I treat plants like I do people. I step back, look at them, and give them a chance. I don’t like to make quick judgments. I think people who do that with people or plants are missing out on a lot of things.”

A self-described “plant person,” Carloftis, 40, traces his love of nature and the outdoors to his childhood in Laurel County, along the banks of the Rockcastle River. Regular walks with his dad two miles through the woods to check the family’s freshwater spring were his early textbooks into the beauty of all types of plants and trees. It was a foundation that’s served him well.

“Having that background in plants has really helped me in New York City, because when I think of a garden, instead of building more and more, I think of plants as architectural elements,” Carloftis says. “I’ll use upright junipers for columns, instead of building something. In New York,

on the rooftops, there’s enough glass and stone and steel already.”

Carloftis’ gardens have been featured in magazines like *Metropolitan Home*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Garden Design*, and *House Beautiful*. He’s appeared on HGTV, “*Good Morning America*,” and “*Martha Stewart Living*.” For his rooftop designs in New York, the Museum of the City of New York awarded him a prestigious landscape design award. He’s in high demand as a lecturer on the garden circuit, and he’s just released his first book called “*First a Garden*.”

It all started in the summer of 1988, when, fresh out of classes at UK, he traveled to New York for the summer and printed some business cards billing himself as a rooftop garden designer — despite the fact that he’d never previously stepped foot in one.

DOING WHAT HE LOVES

The confidence to make such a gutsy move, Carloftis says, came from his solid upbringing — “If you knew my parents, you’d understand. Other than mean dogs and snakes, I have no fear on this earth. Nothing like that intimidates me” — and from what he says were incredible faculty at UK. He points to Sharon Bale’s annuals and perennials class, which he “would not have missed if there had been two feet of snow,” and Bill Fountain and Sam McNeill’s trees and shrubs classes as particularly influential. “I had an idea of what I wanted to do, but they gave me the tools to do it,” he says.

Having completed a degree in communications from UK in 1986 and realizing that any job in that field would mean staying indoors — “not my thing,” he emphasizes — he decided to follow his true passion. So he came back to UK for a year and a half, taking a sampling of art history, horticulture, and

“*First a Garden*” is available online at www.joncarloftis.com and through Joseph-Beth Booksellers. He also is working on a children’s book called “*The Green Experiment*,” which teaches the importance of respecting nature.

WHERE TO FIND JON CARLOFTIS

Jon Carloftis is scheduled to speak in Kentucky June 18 at the University of the Cumberlands, June 22-23 at the Woodford County Humane Society’s Annual Gala at Calumet Horse Farm, and August 13 at his family’s property in Livingston. Check out his Web site at www.joncarloftis.com.





For his rooftop garden designs in New York, the Museum of the City of New York honored Jon Carloftis with its prestigious landscape design award.

landscape design classes. Next thing he knew he was in New York's Upper East Side, passing out business cards to doormen at some of the city's most elite buildings. Noted art collectors Barbara and Eugene Schwartz gave him his first chance, hiring him to design one rooftop container. That was all it took. He's had as many clients as he can handle simply through word of mouth, ever since.

Carloftis not only designs his gardens, but also installs and maintains them monthly with the help of his staff of four. He likes to keep his client base to about 30 gardens. More than that and "I'd lose the joy of it," he says. "I like working with people and having time to really listen to what they want and how they plan to use the space."

When Craig and Madonna Turner of Lexington turned to Carloftis for help designing their backyard pool and landscaping, they explained that they wanted to create a pool with very rounded, natural edges. "He sat down with us and helped us design exactly what we were looking for, something that looks more like a pond than a pool," says Madonna Turner, whose backyard garden is featured in April's *Better Homes and Gardens*. "The first thing Jon did was to go all through our house to see the view of the yard from every room, like he was trying to

bring nature inside."

Recently, Carloftis met with actress Julianne Moore at her New York City residence to discuss her hopes for her next rooftop garden, the third he has designed for her. For this one, his plans will need to be kid — and basketball — friendly.

"The first garden I did for her was all red flowers, which was odd, because here's this beautiful redhead. And the second garden was all shades of green. And now, at her third residence, she has young children so there is a little miniature basketball hoop right out there. And that's part of it," he says. "To me, it needs to be lived in. I can't stand those houses or those gardens where you come in and you feel like you can't sit down. It's so fake. I want people to be comfortable, wherever they are, but especially in my gardens."

CREATING AMBIANCE

To create that feeling of comfort, Carloftis likes to create small rooms with his gardens. Containers of upright junipers might serve as a wall between a sitting area and the rest of the garden, for example. Breaking larger spaces into more manageable,

INSPIRATION FOR NEW GARDEN DESIGN

Jon Carloftis finds inspiration for new garden design ideas everywhere — even in how the furniture of an interior room may be arranged. Still, there is one special place that’s his touchstone. “It’s called the Rockcastle River,” he says. “I can go back, and really get inspired real quick.”



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smaller ones has a twofold purpose, he says. First, it creates an intimacy and an ambiance that makes the space inviting. And then, too, it gives you a place to start the design.

“Gardening can be overwhelming for a lot of people in terms of where to start,” he says. “But what I try to do is create that first little room, right at the back of the house, and then you’re defining the space. That’s where you start. The rest of the design flows from that.”

Whether you live in a city penthouse, in suburbia, or on acres of land, Carloftis says the key to creating a successful garden is the same. “The garden that you really use is that little space right beside your house, where you eat and grill out.” That’s where he always begins his design. Another insider tip: set your plants and shrubs in large containers. While they’re a necessity in rooftop gardening, containers can be equally at home in a garden with lots of land.

“Containers add so much more to a garden, such a different element,” he says.

“They add structure and dimension. And, in many ways, containers make it so much easier. You can have terrible soil conditions, but if you’re using containers, you can just buy the best MiracleGro brand of soil. Also, you can move them around, just like furniture.”

In 1990, when Carloftis bought his home, an 1850s farmhouse in Bucks County, Pa., within commuting distance to New York, the first thing he did — before touching the interior — was begin planting his garden.

One aspect he’s particularly proud of is the tree-lined allée leading up to his door. More than a dozen Bradford pears form almost a tunnel — another example of using plants as architecture — and serve as a “walkway that brings you into a whole new world.”



Jon Carloftis used mirrored lattice to create the illusion of a larger space in this city garden.

Immediately, you leave the regular behind, and you're on to something else," he says.

Recently, his walkway greeted 40 guests at a bourbon tasting party he threw. And every May his Pennsylvania home is the setting for a Derby Party. "I'm always promoting Kentucky," he says. And he means it.

Carloftis comes back to Kentucky at least once a month to work in the garden store he runs with his mother, the Rockcastle River Trading Company, which is on the grounds of their home in Livingston. Visitors can stroll the family's acres of gardens, including the vegetable and herb garden, which is one of his favorites. Between his hectic gardening and lecture schedule, Carloftis makes giving back to his home state a priority. He recently donated his time and materials to design gardens for Ashland, the Henry Clay Estate, UK's Arboretum, and the University of the Cumberlands (formerly Cumberland College). This summer, he will speak at several area fund-raising events as well.

"Jon has always been a very special friend of the arboretum and UK," says arboretum director Marcia

Farris. "We called on him to help design a garden, and in typical fashion he went well beyond that, coming here three times to plan and install the garden and donating all the plants."

"Growing up, giving back was a priority with my family," Carloftis says. "In the end, you can be very successful, but if you don't give back, it doesn't mean a thing."

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And that inspiration, in turn, finds root in a garden. "I always tell people when you have a career where you are beautifying the world, you're doing well," he says.

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