

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

ONE OF AMERICA'S GREAT NEWSPAPERS

SATURDAY, JULY 7, 2012

Mt. Lebanon's Gentlemen's Garden Tour Shows a Male Perspective on Planting

By Kevin Kirkland

Larry, Harry or neighbor Gary, how does your garden grow? With native plants and stone walls and maybe veggies in a row.

It's not that simple, of course. Yards reflect more a gardener's personality than his or her gender. But guys do seem to garden differently than women. Don't believe it? Then check out the Mt. Lebanon Library Garden Tour on Sunday or the Greenridge Garden Club tour next Saturday.

"Men's gardens tend to have more hardscape. Guys like to build stuff," she said, laughing.

Gary Dinsel of North Huntingdon proves her point. He has created arches, patios and a quarter-mile of stone paths in his 1-acre garden. David Blair of Mt. Lebanon is another hard-core fan of hardscape. When he was a boy, he helped his father and brothers turn an overgrown "adult" garden into a functional yard for entertaining and swimming. In his own garden, he opts for custom stone and ironwork.

Alan London, who has been on the Mt. Lebanon tour before, this year added a waiting bench like one he saw in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and several "sticks and stone silos" like those he and his wife, Elaine, admired at this year's Philadelphia Flower Show. In my backyard beer garden, which is also on the Mt. Lebanon tour, I have seating walls/raised beds made from old barnstone that are the perfect place to grow mophead and lace-cap hydrangeas.

Yes, guys do grow flowers, although they're more likely to be flowering perennials, shrubs and trees than annuals.

Rob Papke of Mt. Lebanon was inspired by HGTV to hunt for native plants and unique perennials, including hydrangeas, phlox and asters. Tall garden phlox, with its varied colors and fragrance, is his favorite native. He also grows basil and habanero peppers to make his own pesto and jam, respectively. Edible crops are common in guys' gardens. Men on the annual Sewickley Italian Garden Tour follow Old World traditions as they grow figs, chestnuts, tomatoes and many other crops. Charles Brodbeck first tried his hand at vegetable gardening when he was 12. Then, when he bought his first house in Mt. Lebanon in the early 1980s, he picked up where he left off, growing several types of tomatoes, lettuce, beans, and more than a dozen other vegetables and herbs. He also grows 10 types of dahlias, a challenge because the tubers must be dug up each fall and carefully stored for the following spring.

Male gardeners seem to relish such challenges. David McKibben, who organizes the Mt. Lebanon tour but is not on it this year, battles deer, drought and black spot as he grows a variety of beautiful and sometimes fragrant roses.

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"If you really want to get up at 6 a.m., it isn't to beat your buddies for a tee time but to go into the garden and enjoy your efforts -- or to see what the deer ate during the night," he wrote in an email.

For some men, the challenges are both aesthetic and physical. John Polena worked with his sons to build a natural-looking waterfall and two ponds. This year, he and his wife, Cory, brought in large rocks to decoratively channel runoff on a hillside.



The courtyard garden of Family Hospice in Mt. Lebanon

At its most basic level, a man's garden should have a purpose. Rafael Sciallo, president and CEO of Family Hospice Center for Compassionate Care in Mt. Lebanon, learned from his Bloomfield grandfather how to grow grapes, oregano, figs and Roma tomatoes. In his own garden in Ellwood City, he creates unique containers brimming with cannas, bird of paradise, creeping jenny and other favorite plants. But for the hospice garden, he had a different goal.

"Visitors to our center, along with patients, can often be found in the courtyard, enjoying the tranquility of the setting," he wrote. "The garden courtyard helps complete our mission of providing compassionate care."

Mt. Lebanon Public Library will hold its annual Garden Party from 6 to 8 p.m. today and its 22nd annual Garden Tour from noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Garden party tickets are \$30 at the library. Tour tickets are \$15 today, \$20 on tour day, available at the library, 16 Castle Shannon Blvd., Pittsburgh 15228. Information: 412-531-1912 or www.mtlebanonlibrary.org.