

MAKEOVER

Wide, exuberantly planted flower beds now stretch across the front of Christopher Dabner's cottage, built in the 1940s.



Shaking the Foundations

A Kansas City garden designer with fresh ideas swaps old junipers for a front-yard cottage garden with English roots and American style.

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Above: Spires of pink astilbes suit the rustic cedar fence.

Right: A fieldstone path divides the garden into two densely planted parallel beds.

Below: Kristopher Dabner by the pond he designed.



"My biggest challenge is having enough space for the plants I want. I've thought about digging up the rest of the front yard."

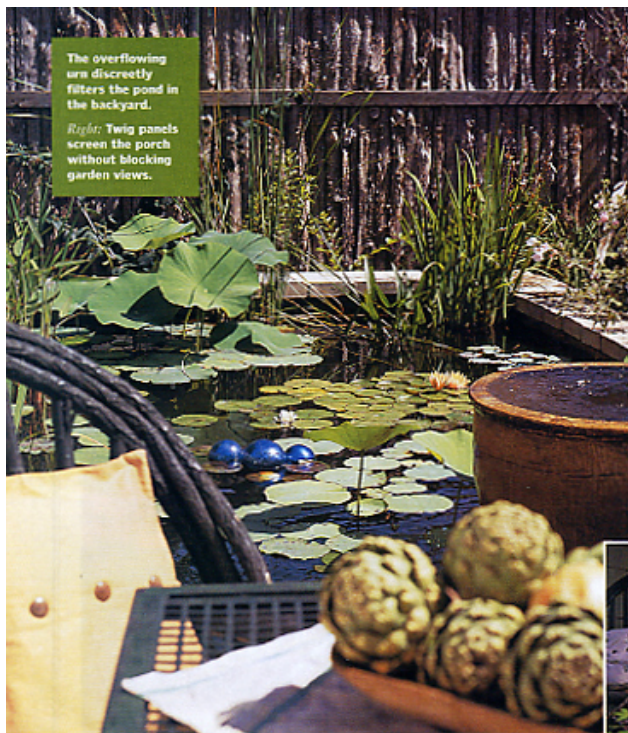
The best gardens have their roots in careful plans, not plants, but Kristopher Dabner, a Kansas City, Missouri, garden designer, started his with both. "First I had to decide what I wanted to do, how I was going to use the space," he says. "I knew I wanted a big, wide border, and I had all kinds of plants waiting for homes. I just didn't know where I was going to use them."

When Kristopher bought his small house in 1995, it was hidden behind overgrown junipers, with the menacing brow of an old metal awning blocking the view from inside. The side porch was closed in with a makeshift arrangement

of old storm windows. The front yard of the generous corner lot showed promise, however: It had an excellent southern exposure.

There was no place in Kristopher's plans for the tired foundation planting. He ripped out the junipers and laid out a great sweeping arc of a garden. At its narrow end, near the sidewalk on the east side of the lot, the border is 4 feet deep. It widens to about 12 feet deep as it approaches the front walk. "I like the one big gesture, the simple curve across the front," Kristopher says.

From the street, the planting appears lush and unbroken.



TEXTURE

Kristopher Dabner's garden is a study in textures.

- The silvery softness of lambs' ear, *Artemisia*, and mullein is scattered through the garden.
- Large hostas, vigorous *Helleborus*, and sculptural *Rodgersia* fill spaces between delicate plants like asters, *Penstemon* yarrow, and astilbes.
- Variegated foliage plants—porcelain berry, variegated *Liriope*, and Japanese forest grass—are splashed throughout the garden.
- The woody texture of the cedar fence is echoed in the twig front-porch portico, the panels on the side porch, and the rustic willow porch furniture.
- Summer flowers lean across a rough limestone path; the pond is framed by smooth-cut limestone blocks.



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but the garden is actually two wide parallel beds, with a rough fieldstone path through the middle.

After he defined the shape of the garden, Kristopher dug the beds, added compost to improve the clay soil, laid the central path, and planted an imaginative mixed border of trees, shrubs, and cottage-garden perennials.

The awning over the front windows soon disappeared, and the porch was restored to its original purpose. Kristopher painted the house moss green, with sand-white trim. The door was painted maroon-black, to match a hollyhock (*Aleca rosea* 'Nigra'). On a trip to Kansas City's downtown market, Kristopher commissioned an artisan to make a twig portico for the front door and twig panels for the side porch.

In the backyard, which is sheltered by a rustic cedar fence, Kristopher built a formal water garden edged with limestone and planted a dramatic combination of native lotus, water lilies, iris, and water canna.

The wide border in the front yard allows him to grow twice as many plants as in a typical foundation planting, but it also serves as a demonstration garden for his landscaping business, The Greensman. Unusual trees and shrubs are given preferential placement—a silvery-blue Colorado spruce (*Picea pungens* 'Iseli Foxtail') near the front door; a fringe tree (*Chionanthus virginicus*) and a white forsythia (*Abelophyllum distichum*) in a corner by the house; and a variegated dogwood (*Cornus florida* 'Rainbow') near the porch.

Under and around them, Kristopher planted *Penstemon*, iris, yarrow, *Coreopsis*, *Scabiosa*, *Salvia*, and daylilies. True lilies shoot up here and there throughout the summer. The splashy foliage of hostas, *Liriope*, and ornamental grasses gives the planting depth, texture, and subtlety. Now, where massive junipers once loomed, an English cottage garden has been plunked down, with perfect confidence, on the very edge of America's Great Plains. □