



# Simply Grand

There was no master plan, but over the years  
the garden slowly took shape,  
evolving into the masterpiece it is today.

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**F**rom even a first fleeting glance, it is clear that this is no ordinary garden. It's not the size, although the acre lot provides enviable opportunities to develop both grand vistas and enchanting vignettes. Rather, it's the sheer beauty of the place, with its massive flowering perennial border encircling a rear lawn whose unique circular striping has turned it into a centerpiece of its own.

The garden began 15 years ago and is the handiwork of Kim Visokey, with husband Dale a constant admirer and sometimes helper. She knew very little when she set to work, her gardening experience while growing up mainly limited to helping her mother plant rings of impatiens around tree trunks. But she had a vision. "At our last house I had started to see gardening as an extension of homemaking and making a beautiful backdrop for my family," she says, and so she set to work.

"I had no concept of soil quality, so I would buy plants at the fall sales, plop them in the existing clay and then be surprised when they didn't come up in the spring," Visokey recalls. She also had no idea of how many plants to buy. "I had to learn to think in terms of 20s rather than twos and threes."

She realized there was a lot she needed to learn, but as she started to visit other gardens, with the Garden Conservancy's Open Days tours a major inspiration, she said to herself, "If they can do this, then why can't I?"



**ABOVE:** Orange paired with blue and purple is always a dynamite combination. Here the native butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) complements a blue centaurea and a purple salvia. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Kim Visokey, always on the prowl for interesting new cultivars, likes to mix and match varieties. Instead of just one kind of purple salvia, she grows 'Sensation Deep Blue', 'Weswe' and 'May Night'. Among her many coneflowers (*Echinacea*), she grows the pink 'Double Delight' (LEFT) and the apricot/orange 'Hot Papaya' and 'Guava Ice' (CENTER). They combine nicely with the purple Stokes' aster 'Honeysong Purple'. **RIGHT:** *Astilbe chinensis* 'Visions'.



A book on labyrinths gave Kim Visokey the inspiration for the swirling lawn that is today one of the most stunning features of her monumental perennial garden.



**ABOVE:** Removing some of the stone panels in a patio opened up the space for a unique design featuring succulents and other ground covers. An espaliered Kieffer pear stands against the wall to the right.

Living near the Chicago Botanic Garden was fortuitous since she could put the children in the car and pop in for quick study visits. She also began inviting more experienced gardeners to come over, asking them for advice on what she should do. And she read a lot. "With some books I could feel that I'd seen the gardens they described."

Another influence as the garden took shape was art. "I enjoy painting," Visokey explains, "and I've dabbled in classes here and there – oil, watercolor, pastel – and what you learn about textures and colors applies to gardening. I look at a landscape as if it were a canvas, and you learn to repeat things in the garden as if you were doing a painting."

There was a swimming pool with a cabana on the property when the Visokeys moved in, but no garden. They removed the pool and proceeded to the next order of business, creating some kind of buffer zone to reduce noise from a nearby road. They brought in soil to build berms and planted them with a variety of evergreen and deciduous trees such as Douglas fir, white pine and birch. The perennial borders that Visokey planted thus

have an attractive dark green background that contrasts handsomely with the flowers' many different colors. "I like masses of hot colors," she says, and it's no doubt a good thing. Considering the size of the garden, pastels would be more difficult to see from a distance.

Visokey credits landscape architect Ryan Kettlecamp with the next phase of the garden's development. Invited over to give his advice, Kettlecamp made a key observation. "You need a ribbon," he said, by which he meant a path that would link the house to the garden. A period of researching walkway materials ensued before Visokey settled on using gravel. The front parking courtyard was already gravel and this would provide continuity between the front of the house and the back. A wide gravel path now lines the perennial beds and leads all the way around the garden.

The idea for the striped circular lawn came after the path went in and the lawn "was just sitting there." A book on labyrinths got her thinking ... hard ... and she approached the men who mow the lawn and asked if they could cut the grass



**When the Visokeys began developing the garden, blocking off the sounds and views of the nearby street was a priority. Today, the deciduous shade trees and conifers they planted have established privacy and created a sense of enclosure.**



**TOP:** A monumental mixed container planter welcomes visitors to the entry courtyard. **ABOVE:** Kim Visokey takes a brief pause from tending the garden.

The Visokey garden will be included in the Garden Conservancy's Open Days tours on June 28. For further information go to [gardenconservancy.org/events](http://gardenconservancy.org/events).

to create a similar effect. "There's nothing special about it," Visokey explains. "We leave it uncut for a couple of weeks and then cut it in alternating rows. They use a regular push mower. I love how the lawn now becomes front and center when the garden is 'down,' not having a good hair day. And it's beautiful at 4 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon on a summer day when the sun is backlighting the lawn. It becomes like a sculpture."

Another unique touch is the bluestone patio where stone squares have been lifted and planted with an array of low-growing succulents such as sedums and sempervivums. Creeping thyme could be used as well. Low-growing boxwoods outline the patio and an espaliered Kieffer pear tree (*Pyrus communis 'Kieffer'*) grows up the adjacent wall. It's an elegant, formal counterpoint to a garden that is otherwise based on swirling circles and curves. "The garden just developed," recalls Visokey. "There was no master plan."

Today Visokey is keenly interested in getting the next generation to garden as a lifestyle pursuit. While her own children may tease her and call her a "garden freak" (a sassy term that makes her smile), she knows she has served them well. "My kids get it," she says.

"Gardening is the best way to create a haven in your yard. It has opened my children's eyes to the softer side of life and given them a place to hang out that's beautiful and peaceful. It has also taught them patience.

"I love every bit of it. It has been the adventure of my life." ♦

Editor Carolyn Ulrich has written for *Chicagoland Gardening* since its inception. She is a former weekly garden columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and has received several awards for magazine writing from the Garden Writers Association.