



Your Small Paradise

Ours is a big country, and much of our thinking is influenced by a collective sense of spaciousness. The sheer size of our houses and yards takes Europeans by surprise, living as they do in towns shaped centuries ago by the distances people could travel on foot, rather than in automobiles. Americans tend to achieve privacy by putting more acreage between us and the neighbors' property line. In the towns of the old world, they were more likely to build an enclosed space. I'd like to see more of us revisit that concept.

Yes, I am a courtyard junkie. I found my house in Haddam just a few weeks after returning from a trip to Spain. Spain, like many hot countries, favors courtyard gardens, cooled by the shade of tall trees and overhanging balconies, perfumed by scented flowers, bejeweled with bright green moss where water drips from the fountain. There is always a water source, however simple; in fact the word "paradise" derives from an ancient Persian word meaning a walled garden with water. I saw courtyards everywhere. In Toledo, a medieval city with streets so narrow I could stand with arms outstretched and touch the walls on either side, tall doors that were almost unnoticeable opened to reveal hidden spaces overflowing with bright flowers in humble pots. In the Alhambra—last stronghold of the Moors in Spain—palace gardens boasted of the sultans' wealth, with exquisite carvings, long reflecting pools, and lavish plantings. Extravagant or basic, each created an intimate space that invited contemplation.

Not that a courtyard garden doesn't have many practical aspects, too. It can be very economical: a single specimen tree, a small flowerbed, a simple off-the-shelf bubbler fountain will have far more impact in a small space than they would have if stranded in the middle of a large yard. A smaller garden is manageable, more readily kept tidy with a lower toll in aching backs and grubby fingernails. But it's the magic that matters: paradoxically, a human-created space, set apart, can yet bring nature into closer focus.

The gentle sounds of burbling water and birdsong distract from the noisier world outside; the fragrance of scented flowers is multiplied; the sun's warmth is held in early spring while walls and trees create welcome shade in summer; at night, white flowers glow in starlight and you can watch moths collecting nectar.

So as my realtor apologized for the 'awkward' layout of the property, with a driveway dead-ending at a garage and the house seventy feet directly behind it, I was already imagining the courtyard in between. In back was the pond, with woods beyond, but in front, I would have this intimate space. In back, I could listen to the water leaving the pond overflow and continuing on its way toward the river; in front, water would fall from the shell held by Raphael, my bronze cupid fountain. He's preposterously formal for my modest country house, but who cares? My courtyard, my rules.

I'm two and a half years into the project, held up by construction, excavation, and endless re-imagining, but it's finally beginning to take shape. Raphael is still in my living room, waiting for me to dig out a little pool for him, and the walkway is nothing but a pile of stone to one side, but the peonies bloomed a few weeks ago and there are tiny apples forming on trees planted last fall. I added a row of columns, carefully spaced according to the golden ratio, to make a fourth side. Even though it's not at all solid, it creates just enough of a sense of enclosure to define the space. Eventually, American wisteria will twine around the columns. Or maybe grapevines. Stonework and groundcovers will replace weedy patches, some evergreens will be added for winter interest, and all that bittersweet will be routed. All this will take time, but it doesn't matter, because the magic is already here.