

A Bit of Paradise Designed to Delight – Gilliland’s Gardens

Mark Gilliland

By Iris Hiskey Arno

“Landscape is a kind of sculpture, with the environment as material. Plants provide a living palette of hues, shapes, textures, and scent, a performance that plays out between the seasons and across the years.” So says Mark Gilliland, 51, a visual artist who works in both graphic and landscape design. For the last three years, the latter has clearly taken center stage around Westchester, where green-and-white “Garden Artistry” signs bearing the logo of a lotus blossom identify his work.

One way of approaching Gilliland’s home in Irvington is via a footpath that crosses over a brook. The sound of water rushing over stones, especially audible after the recent rains, is a fitting introduction to the verdant natural surroundings of the white house which, from this approach, is almost hidden among the greenery. Bordering the shadowed path to the front door are hostas, ferns, rhododendrons, and other shade-loving plants.

Around back, a variety of yellow flowers are blooming — yarrow, evening primrose, and a large spider lily (“See how the petals are so much longer than they are wide? That’s why it’s called a spider lily,” Gilliland explains.) But there are other colors in the garden as well — a sea holly that has faded from its previous iridescent blue but still provides contrasting color and shape, a ligularia with purplish-bottomed leaves like water lily pads floating in the air atop thin stalks, and a variety of day lilies and astilbes.

On the brick patio between the house and a smaller building Gilliland uses as an art studio and tool storage area, he and his wife, Marion Asnes, the executive editor of Financial Planning magazine, outsmart the local groundhogs by growing vegetables and spices in pots. The usual tomatoes, basil, cucumbers, and eggplants are there, as well as Brussel sprouts and a spiky artichoke. Petunias and nicotiana (decorative tobacco) plants have seeded themselves in the spaces between the bricks, and potted papyrus and black bamboo have been brought outside for the warmer weather. Strung above the glistening leaves and trellises, strings of Tibetan prayer flags give a hint of what the visitor will find inside.

Dream images inspire art

Within Gilliland's studio, the walls are covered with his most recent work — brilliantly colored, ornate prints based on images that began appearing to him in extraordinarily vivid dreams five or six years ago. Digital collages of multiple photos and drawn images have been layered, manipulated, and processed using the Illustrator computer software program. The overall impression is Asia meets Psychedelia. "I've always been attracted to Tibetan art very strongly," he says. "The most I can figure is that I had a number of past lives in Eastern traditions because I have very specific memories or imaginings."

Gilliland uses the circular mandala motif and, at first glance, it seems he is just recreating Indian and Tibetan images or Native American medicine wheels. However, on closer inspection, the viewer discovers more modern images of hawks, constellations, bones, ferns, clouds, and snakeskins. Many of the seemingly traditional Eastern god and goddess figures are revealed — in what he calls "a weird juxtaposition" — to be photos of nudes. Not surprisingly, flowers abound; not only the traditional lotus blossom, but also rubrum lilies and angel's trumpets (*brugmansia*).

Gilliland earned a BFA from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1976, with a major in sculpture. He received certification in landscape design from the New York Botanical Garden in 2003, and recently completed the Master Gardener Program of the Cornell Cooperative Extension. His familiarity with Eastern religions and art forms was acquired through less formal study and travel. Back in the late '70s, Gilliland also earned a degree in electrical engineering from a California trade school, which led to several decades working in the technology field — first in a microcomputer start-up firm in San Francisco and later in software development in New York.

Art, spirituality, and gardening are all related in Gilliland's universe. "There's definitely a major sculptural element in gardening. You're looking across a sweep of space and seeing different shapes, forms, colors, and textures," he says. In his own garden, he created terraced planting areas on a slope by building low walls of rough-cut bluestone slabs.

"Through gardening, we enhance the world, creating greater beauty and harmony by our actions and intentions — creating a bit of paradise right

in our own yard,” he says. “Of course, working in the garden can be a lesson in “karma yoga”: tasks that might be dull and repetitive, or even hard labor, can be transformed into a sort of meditation in care and giving to others — the plants.”

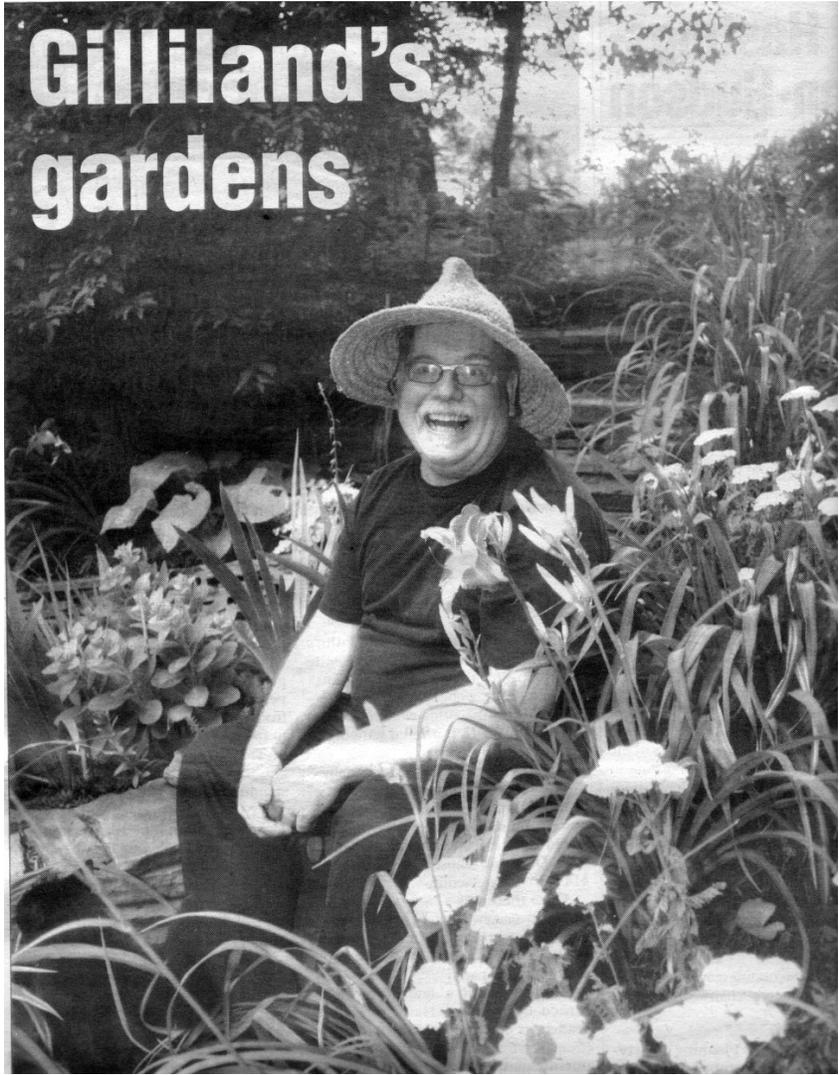
A multi-faceted approach

Talking with Gilliland about gardening is obviously not simply about how to deal with familiar problems like too much shade and too many deer. It is discussing how a bending path in a garden can add a sense of journey, or how winter gardens can be accented by the brightly colored branches of red and yellow twig dogwoods.

The conversation might drift to the way Japanese gardeners change the material of their garden paths for visual effect every few yards or even design them to force a visitor to stop and notice a certain sight. Gilliland might describe how nineteenth-century English gardens often employed a “borrowed landscape” — such as the view of neighboring farmland. In this technique, the eye was led to an extension of the landscape by a clever use of perspective in which shrubbery was used to narrow the path and thereby focus on the view at its end.

In the village, Gilliland did the landscaping for the McVickar House, home to the Irvington Historical Society. Located at the top of Main Street, the house dates back to 1853 and to complement its recent restoration Gilliland drew on the two garden styles in vogue in the United States in the 1800s: European formal, which he used in the small front garden, and the more naturalistic, curvilinear English for the side area. A member of the Irvington Beautification Committee, he also designed the plantings at the Bridge Street complex down by the river, factoring in extra environmental stresses, such as wind and salt.

“Flowers show us the inherent beauty of the world, the amazing creativity of life,” Gilliland says. “Each flower uniquely grows from seed to bloom, unfurling following its own hidden dynamic. And each one is ‘perfect’ in becoming/being. So in this way, the flowers are calling upon us to slow down, recognize the creative beauty of the world, appreciate the moment, and bow in gratitude as we smell each blossom.”



*To learn more about Garden Artistry, go to www.garden-artistry.com;
for more information on Gilliland's art, go to www.imagemaya.org.*

