

GARDEN

Detail and design

The gardens at Edgartown's Charlotte Inn have an effortless feel.

BY JAN POGUE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NINA BRAMHALL



The grounds of the Charlotte Inn are as much a part of the experience of staying there as are the riding boots, beautiful lamps, and fine art dominating every space of the indoors. Although the land the inn occupies is only one acre, the grounds have the fluid lines and spacious air of a large estate. Painters have lost themselves in the gardens, trying to capture the light, the flowers, the sense of secrecy built into the grounds; guests continually comment on the quiet and peace.

Like the inn itself, the grounds are a product of creativity, luck, and a good eye. Owners Gery and Paula Conover use the outside to extend their antique-filled world: The gardens carry their own antiquities – a carriage step from England, planter boxes from long-ago Parisian cafés, antique water pumps from across Europe.



The Charlotte Inn is home to a number of separate gardens and meticulous walkways, including Paula's Garden, left, and the wisteria-covered stretch looking out to South Summer Street, right. The main house, above, is one of five buildings where guests stay.





Once overgrown and untended, the grounds have been slowly transformed into the oasis of beauty that defines the inn. Hundred-year-old boxwoods and arborvitae were brought from Bridgehampton, New York. Huge trees were trucked in. A gardening shed added structure, storage, and tranquility to the grounds. Gery estimates he spent the better part of five years just getting the grounds and the buildings presentable after he purchased them. The next thirty years, Gery says, have “been more fun” because he could add things like antique iron urns from an English manor house, and two stunning French stands holding antique pots of flowers.

The grounds are anchored by mature plantings of rhododendrons, English boxwood, privet, ivy, pachysandra, clematis, and arborvitae, all intermixed with dark green iron fencing, meandering brick pathways, and white garden arches. The sculpted hedges, enhanced with dozens of pots of

seasonal flowers, hide small, secluded areas furnished with comfortable patio chairs and sofas. Current issues of various magazines are placed close at hand for a moment of easy browsing. A small fish pond is shaded by a perfectly shaped weeping birch tree and indulgently called “Lake Charlotte” by the owners. A fifty-year-old wisteria drapes one side of the main building of the inn; English and French border tiles define the walkways.

The grounds have surprises centered around thoughtfulness, comfort, and aesthetics. In an instance of need fitting form, Gery tucked in one corner of an addition to the main house in order to accommodate a mature tree that adds shade and character to a small patio off the inn’s dining room. In another instance, when a storm destroyed the evergreens outside the Carriage House, Gery and Jeff Lovett, the grounds manager, were left with a wound in the carefully manicured

The secluded courtyard in front of the Coach House, above, is an inviting space to while away a summer day amid roses and boxwoods.

Details of the property, right, feature an antique European water pump behind the main house and a shade-dappled walkway lush with ivy and rhododendrons.





Outside the main house, English and French border tiles accent the brick walkways, and a French stand holds colorful potted flowers.

setting they'd spent years developing. They pulled out a pair of hundred-year-old glass doors, which had been stored away, made a frame for them, and used them to create the Reading Garden. With the statuary placed inside it, the trees overhanging it, the walls surrounding it, and the doors framing it, it feels like a secret garden.

The same is true in Paula's Garden, behind the Garden House. The garden, which Paula tends, is small, seasonal, and filled with the bounties of nature from early spring to late fall. In addition to the flowers and hedges, the yard also is home to a tiny building constructed to enhance the idea of an expansive British garden. The building, with a steeply pitched roof and a single room inside, is a folly, a fairly useless, utterly charming structure conceived by Gery, called simply the Garden Cottage – and designed to anchor that

corner of the grounds. Although it has no practical use, it draws every visitor's eye with its perfect symmetry and beckoning windows. Like some of the other structures on the inn's grounds,



Gery and Paula Conover with their golden retrievers, Ozzie and Jezebel.

this one was built without plans, from an image Gery had executed by his willing builders.

The grounds work is a constant adventure for the innkeepers and staff. In late March, even as the winter usually clings stubbornly to Martha's Vineyard, every minute of decent weather is used for painting, repairing damage to the shrubs, tying things back that were pulled over, uncovering the boxwood, cleaning out the fountains. And it continues as the weather improves: In the summer months, while Paula is pouring coffee and chatting with guests at breakfast, Gery often takes up a broom and sweeps the front sidewalks of the inn or trims the hedges. "This is kind of like a land version of commissioning a yacht," says Gery. ♦

Excerpted and adapted from *Behind the Times on Purpose: The Charlotte Inn of Martha's Vineyard* (Vineyard Stories, July 2007).