

# Hedge fun

From box bush to bower, Conte & Conte has the 411 on flora

By Rosemarie T. Anner







**Previous spread:** Soundview Manor. All photos courtesy of Conte & Conte. **Top:** Steeplechase Farm. Credit: Stacy Bass. **Bottom:** Steeplechase Farm. Credit: Mick Hales.

**J**ohn Conte has been designing landscapes practically all of his life. A Greenwich native who grew up in the business, Conte has created some of the most sophisticated, elegant estates in Fairfield and Westchester counties and beyond.

His designs speak of classical lines, particularly in the structures that grace many of his landscapes, while his own private domain has a totally different ambience that is at once fun and carefree – and just as carefully orchestrated as his more elaborate endeavors.

Conte's portfolio is a narrative of arches, pergolas, colonnades, and arbors; of niches for statuary and benches with an antique look about them; and of formal gardens that are chiseled into the land or ones that sport a happy-go-lucky air about them. He knows how to sculpt land ("grading") and how to weave white wooden fences, even riding rings, into the landscape, as he did for the equestrian estate, Steeplechase Farm, in Greenwich. Conte was intimately involved in the construction and siting of the buildings and landscape features that are so symmetrical you would think a mathematician helped map them out.

An open-air colonnade with tall, white pillars, for example, separates the hardscape of a garage courtyard and the leisure lure of an in-ground pool. "I needed something very substantial to separate these two functions," says Conte. To harmonize with the shingle-style architecture of the manor, Conte knew he would rely on a very classic design for whatever screening he would build.

He chose a 10-foot-high stonewall, 60 feet long, hugged by climbing hydrangeas on one side and interrupted by a double-door white gate in its center. He and his design team built five 6-inch-deep recesses in the pool side of the wall that offer rhythmical interludes in an otherwise flat surface. Overhead rafters—a wonderful candidate for all sorts of clinging vines—are anchored to the wall on the garage side and to the white colonnade on the pool side.

Balancing the strong handsome presence of the colonnade and pool are rectangular vegetable and cutting garden sites on the opposite side of the house that the woman of the house requested. The plantings were her choices and invariably changed from year to year. Connecting pool and gardens is a large stone terrace whose crescent-shaped wide steps lead to paddocks and riding rings below. Throughout the landscape, very carefully constructed stonework, a Conte signature, is everywhere: walls, steps, terraces, colonnade, short towers and driveway.

In 1997, Conte branched out from his three-generation family's firm, Fairfield House and Garden (which does all his installations), to establish his own design company with his wife Kimberly. He is so active on Greenwich committees that relate to the beauty and preservation of open space (Greenwich Land Trust, the Audubon, town conservation, etc.), and to lecturing (a trio of presentations by him is slated for the spring at the Garden Education Center in Greenwich), you wonder how he finds time to sit at his drawing board. He redesigned Greenwich Common Park on Greenwich Avenue to be more inviting.

"I did that park on a pro bono basis," he explains. "It's where Kim and I had our first date, and it was a great way to give back to the town that we love."

Conte keeps a restrained hand in the horticultural aspects of a landscape. He favors hydrangeas for that reason. Easy to care for and easy to love, they populate his works with voluptuous azure blooms, although he is not averse to the rigidity of boxwood where it is needed to delineate parterres.

A good example of that can be found at the Soundview Manor estate he created in nearby Bedford, a triumph in Old World classical design. Conte constructed enormous metal arches to frame the canvases of



**Top:** Steeplechase Farm. Credit: Mick Hales. **Bottom left:** Langhome Lodge gazebo. **Bottom right:** Langhome Lodge retaining wall.





Top: Soundview Manor. Left: Soundview Manor. Bottom: Langhorne Lodge.



With all these classical canvases dominating his work, you would think Conte's own home and grounds would mirror a similar trajectory. Ah, not so. His Greenwich house and land, Langhorne Lodge, is best described as country rustic, a far cry from the classic lines of the grand estates with which he has been involved. There's a wonderful ease about his property, as if every element and structure were integral to the land for years before Conte bought it.

"There were almost no level areas on the property originally," says Conte, "and no place for a sunny gathering [although his outdoor veranda sports a roof to block brilliant sun-rays]. The rock garden, the cutting garden, the vegetable garden and the rear lawn were all graded to create those outdoor rooms. We also removed several large rock outcroppings to make room for the rear parking area and to fill in areas."



Above: Langhorne Lodge.

garden rooms. There are perennial beds and one hedged by Lilliputian boxwoods and one that is a finely clipped evergreen maze.

Pergolas are everywhere in his work. "It's a very old classic landscape element," Conte says, but what is new is people's awareness of shade structures. At one time, home owners embraced the open-to-the-sky look on their properties, with unbroken vistas across luxurious lawns to lakes, ponds and open sea quite the norm, but as people became much more aware of the harmful effects of too much sun, shade structures entered the lexicon. Most often, these structures are freestanding but sometimes not.

So to balance a formal brick Georgian that boasted a sunroom on one side of the house, Conte designed an elliptical terrace with thick pristine white columns supporting high rafters that permit dappled sunshine to drift through to the terrace. Small cutouts for bedding plants are integrated at the edge of the terrace to mimic the elliptical design and balance the pergola.

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