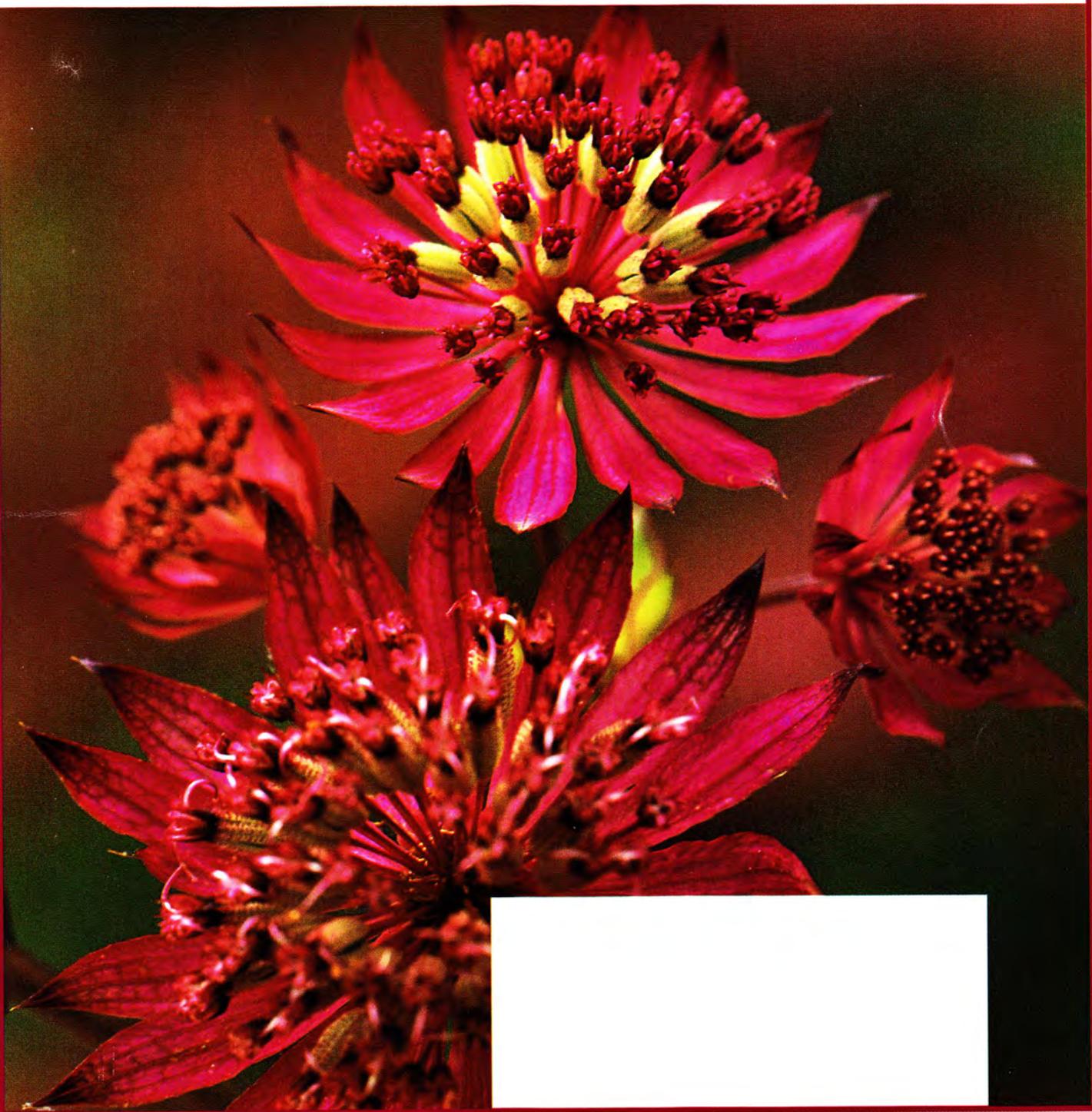


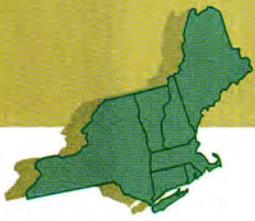
SECRETS TO GREAT GARDEN DESIGNS

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Horticulture

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Open to the Public

A museum garden softens summer in the city

The garden at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum is a small enclosed park with a central lawn, shaded shrub borders, and several seasonal flower gardens, all enhanced by wisteria vines reaching the roof of the museum building—the Fifth Avenue mansion built by Andrew Carnegie in 1908.

Renovated 10 years ago, after years of neglect, the gardens have become lush displays again. Enclosed by an elegant 10-foot tall wrought iron fence, the gardens offer a quiet respite on upper Fifth Avenue, complete with benches and a café. The garden beds have handsome architectural settings of brick, stone, or iron fencing.

There are two distinct growing conditions in the small park. The south side of the garden is shaded by large old trees and the buildings across the street. Tree shade and the greediness of their roots create an extremely dry, dark situation. After several years of hits and misses, we settled on cherry laurel, yew, hollies, oak-leaf hydrangea, and rose of Sharon, underplanted with painted ferns, hellebores, symphytum, and hosta. These gardens lack the drama of colorful flower beds but provide a quiet green retreat on hot summer days.

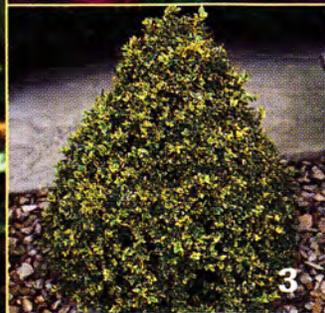
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The Cooper-Hewitt is an oasis in the middle of the city, with plantings that look great most of the year.

City Magic

Designer Mary Riley Smith uses plants with good foliage and early bloom to keep the gardens colorful year-round. 1. *Helleborus orientalis* 2. *H. orientalis* 3. *Buxus sempervirens* 'Elegantissima' 4. *Hydrangea quercifolia* 5. *H. q.* in fall color 6. *Spiraea japonica* 'Goldflame' 7. *S. j.* 'Goldflame' in fall color





NATIVE AMERICANS

Shooting Stars (*Dodecatheon* spp.)

Though they grow from a nest of fleshy white roots, from a cultural point of view I think it easier to envisage shooting stars as spring bulbs. There are 15 or so species native to North America; three grow east of the Rockies. You find them along seeps, springs, and in damp meadows where winter snow and rain leave the ground damp through the spring. As soon as the ground thaws, the leaves emerge with a certain succulent tenderness seen only in plants with ready access to water. The bunched leaves resemble greens from a mesclun salad mix—dusky green and fairly thin. From their center rise stiff 6- to 16-inch stems with a tassel of flower buds at the top. Like cyclamen, the flowers face downward, but the white, shell-pink, rose, or lavender petals reflex back, forming an upside down skirt narrowed at the waist and punctuated by a contrasting golden band. The stamens and the pistil press tightly together and narrow to a sharp beak, giving the whole flower the appearance of an earthbound, feathered dart. Robust clumps can support dozens of stems, each capped by 14 or more flowers. The flowers open in waves, extending bloom over two to three weeks in mid-spring. As the flowers fade, so too do the leaves, and the plants become fully dormant by June. So as not to disturb them during dormancy, I like to plant shooting stars near the base of a rock to mark their place while they sleep.

I have grown about half of the species, and find all but the high alpine species equally amenable in cultivation. The most commonly available are the eastern *Dodecatheon meadia* (pride of Ohio), *D. amethystinum* (jeweled shooting star), and the western *D. pulchellum* (dark-throated shooting star). However, different species readily cross-pollinate in cultivation, and most nursery material is of hybrid origin. No matter, they are all beautiful and welcome additions to the spring garden. Dodecatheons are hardy in USDA Zones 4-9 and prefer a spot that receives 3-6 hours of sun while they are in active growth. Abundant moisture is vital in spring, but shooting stars can withstand moderate drought once dormant.—*William Cullina is the director of the New England Wild Flower Society Nurseries and the author of several books, including Growing and Propagating Wildflowers and Native Trees, Shrubs, and Vines (Houghton Mifflin, 2000).*



Dodecatheon meadia in bloom

- Bunched dusty green leaves with downward facing flowers
- Flowers in shades of pink, white, rose, or lavender
- Plants go dormant in early summer
- Hardy USDA Zones 4-9

Open to the Public

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Across the lawn, against the house, there are four long, narrow gardens in full sun. Backed by brick or limestone walls and balustrades these beds are perfect for colorful shrubs, perennials, and annuals. In the spring, tulips and muscari bloom with the wisteria that scrambles up the front of the house. The bulb display is followed by summer plantings of perennials and annuals, fortified with small shrubs.

The shrubs, such as variegated boxwood, golden foliage spireas, and chamaecyparis, are an important part of the color strategy at the Cooper-Hewitt gardens. One favorite is *Buxus sempervirens* 'Elegantissima'. With its creamy yellow variegation, this boxwood is a good companion for strong pink and red flowers. It is a very low maintenance shrub, growing slowly in an elegant oval shape and needing light clipping once or twice a year.

I include spireas with chartreuse or yellow foliage, more for their leaf color than their modest flowers. *Spiraea* 'Goldflame' or *S.* 'Magic Carpet' add bright notes through the summer, when even the color green can start to look hot and tired.

In a public garden, where it is important to keep flower gardens looking bright and full throughout the growing season, small shrubs with colorful foliage do their part by adding texture, form, and substance to the scheme while requiring little maintenance. In the future I hope to find spots for new treasures that help to carry the garden through the seasons.—*Mary Riley Smith, a garden designer based in New York City, is the author of The Front Garden (Houghton Mifflin, 2001). She has worked to revitalize the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum gardens for ten years.*

If You Go

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