

Southern Accents

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IN THE *Garden*

Teamed in Work and Marriage,
Charleston's Hugh and Mary Palmer
Dargan Are Two of the South's
Leading Landscape Architects

After only eight years, landscape architects Hugh and Mary Palmer Dargan are relatively new to Charleston, yet they are at the hub of garden activity in the city. Their house in the Old Ansonborough neighborhood is fast becoming a gathering place for the garden cognoscenti. And their skill in garden design has brought old Charleston to their door and attracted newcomers wanting introduction to this balmy clime.

The Dargans have an unbiased perspective on Charleston. Because their professional connections and experiences are of a national and international scale, they understand the context of the historic Southern city's garden tradition and have made an informed decision to live and work there. When garden connoisseurs come to Charleston, Hugh and Mary Palmer are frequently the contact, and they are on hand to conduct the tours and to interpret the gardens of the historic district.

Following the footsteps of Hugh and Mary Palmer will lead you on an extensive tour of Charleston's courtyards. Examples of their expertise flourish on just about every block. Theirs is a creative approach to gardens reminiscent of another century but tailored to today's lifestyle.

"This is our favorite thing to do—to get out, walk, and look at our gardens," says Hugh Dargan in his deep voice rich with a Low Country drawl. "And this is my favorite street," he says, referring to a clean, urban scene of tightly spaced houses. Twice more, Hugh pronounced avenues to be his "favorite street," but each time he was sincere. Perhaps his favorite street, or his favorite

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garden, is the one where he is standing at a given moment.

While strolling these manicured blocks, Mary Palmer occasionally steps over to touch a particularly fine brick wall. Her sharp eye critiques the eighteenth-century mortar and brick, and she exercises her keen memory by dissecting its architectural elements. It is this passion for excellence combined with a love of place that drives the couple's success.

Mary Palmer has had a lifelong interest in both gardening and historic preservation. Following her undergraduate degree in botany and her tenure as botanist and education director at Cheekwood Botanical Gardens and Fine Arts Center in Nashville, she received a masters degree in landscape architecture from Louisiana State University, writing her thesis on the *Early English Kitchen Garden*. As an early member of the Garden Conservancy's National Advisory Board, Mary Palmer has served this national organization dedicated to the preservation of landmark private gardens.

Hugh studied landscape architecture at the University of Georgia and began practice in Darlington, South Carolina, in 1973. In the early 1980s, his interest in historic gardens led him to become a founding board member of the Southern Garden History Society, the first American regional organization dedicated to the study and preservation of gardens. While attending one of these meetings, he and Mary Palmer met for the first time.

The couple's marriage has brought about a merger of interests, energies, and ideas that has been a boon to garden preservation. Even their honeymoon had a garden focus: they spent it in Sussex, England, at the National Trust/Attingham Program studying the restoration of historic landscapes. Since then, they have returned to England to conduct landscape evolution studies for Stanway and Newark Park in Gloucestershire.

Although the Dargans also enjoy working throughout the South, they count Charleston's historic district their best workshop. And a workshop it is. As Hugh observes about the

On a trellis he designed for a client's garden (opposite top), Hugh Dargan has a bird's-eye view of wife and business partner, Mary Palmer Dargan.

TOP LEFT: A garden path paved in an antique pattern leads past boxwood-edged beds to a gathering spot. The little boy in the fountain is a mid-19th-century French piece.

CENTER: The Dargans' richly detailed paving and planting enliven the entry to their Charleston single house.

LEFT: The lines of a pair of lattice pavilions echo those of the sculpture, at center, by Michael Thunder.

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"When we are done and walk out, no one should know that we've been there."

architectural elements in Charleston's gardens. "For anything you do, there's an example of it here, and you can study the proportions and details." When Hugh was designing a new wall for a significant site, he found his textbook in the gardens all around him. "I learned a tremendous amount about the history of walls in this town, and that's what makes this town so rewarding. It is all here." It is the Dargans' skill in recognizing what is around them and applying those lessons that sets their designs apart.

In Charleston's tight garden spaces, scale is critical and every detail counts. Each garden has individual limits and possibilities, so each solution is different. There is no formula for a Dargan garden except that it is always appropriate—to the site and to the client. For that reason, most elements in their gardens are custom designed.

Look for a signature style or plant, and you will not find it. Hugh

asserts, "When we are done and walk out, no one should know that we've been there. That's not a very good advertisement, but we like it that way."

"We are trying to elevate the understanding and appreciation of outdoor environments that are works of art," explains Mary Palmer. If a bricklayer can't grasp the artistry of a brick paving pattern interrupted by stone, Mary Palmer will help set each stone. She plans the placement of each brick for a re-created wall. Contractors learn to respect even a six-inch gap drawn on the paving plan, though it may seem inconsequential. That gap is where Madison jasmine and *Rosa mutabilis* are planted to climb Mary Palmer's carefully designed wall.

If there is any problem with their work, it is the difficulty of discerning old from new, for the Dargans pride themselves in the authenticity of every detail. Although the construction may be new, the com-

ponents will not be. Budget providing, their painstaking attention may mean seeking out vintage bricks, even if that requires getting them from a sunken barge at the bottom of the Cooper River.

As designers, the Dargans are closely attuned to plants. They blend several vines on a single arbor for evergreen foliage and extended summer bloom, and when they need a rose, they choose an

BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT: Even the smallest oasis of green provides a treat for the senses with graceful lines, the fragrance of tea olive, and water trickling in the fountain.

OPPOSITE: The Dargans discovered the pattern of the parterre garden (left) when trenches were dug to investigate the history of the site. Once an unsightly garage, this renovated structure (right) opens its doors to become a garden house. Formerly a service yard, the adjoining garden provides the hostess with a luxurious setting for her guests.

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That's not a very good advertisement, but we like it that way," says Hugh Dargan.

old-fashioned one that is authentic to the era of the garden, such as Old Blush. If they need to re-create a boxwood hedge, they use the slow-growing English box that would have grown on the same site two hundred years ago.

Because they observe their gardens closely during installation and establishment, the Dargans will occasionally create a gardener as well as a garden. Under their tutelage, more than one homeowner has learned to enjoy tending their own pretty plot of ground.

For all the Dargans' concentration on historic preservation, they are actually one of the primary instruments of change in the historic city known for its gardens. The forces driving that change are several. With the past decade of increasing real estate values and a dawning consciousness of preservation, residents of the historic district have turned their attention outdoors to restore or re-create

the setting of a historic home.

In addition, the lifestyles of Charleston's residents are changing. Traditionally, gardens were planted with camellias, tea olives, and azaleas, all of which bloom during the winter and spring. For generations, it was a Charleston custom for entire families to leave the city in the humid summer and retreat to Flat Rock, Highlands, or other spots in the cool mountains of North Carolina. So there was no need for a summer garden.

But with the coming of the annual Spoleto festival in 1977 and the fall preservation tours that began sixteen years ago (not to mention the ubiquitous air conditioner), homeowners have begun to take year-round pleasure in their gardens. Today Charleston gardens are used for entertaining. And for that reason, the Dargans create outdoor rooms for many of their clients. One of the couple's favorites is an arbor-covered terrace that steps down

into a garden which is scaled to fit a tent. The owner has used it for fund-raisers, weddings, and after-concert gatherings during Spoleto.

For all the emphasis on detail and authenticity, the Dargans' gardens are remarkably functional. Where a privy traditionally has stood, they might design a garden pavilion. Inspiration may come from an architectural fragment or a client's sculpture. Sometimes it comes from the relics of a garden past, whether found in old documents or in the soil by an archaeologist.

The key to the success of preservation in Charleston has been stringent control over new construction or changes to structures in the historic district. It is indicative of the quality of the Dargans' work that their designs pass the scrutiny of the city's Boards of Adjustment and Architectural Review. As Hugh explains, "Many businesses have slogans. Ours is, 'We get things approved.'" ♦

