

## Ties that Bind

A skillful design marries two riverside properties into one family compound in Jacksonville, Florida

by Philip Morris  
Photographs by Bill Stites

Designing a garden setting for a residence is always a balancing act between structure and site. But what about combining two existing houses with grounds into one ensemble? Tricky, indeed, but for this family compound overlooking the St. Johns River in Jacksonville, Florida, the plan succeeds.

"Ann Hicks heard me give a talk on historic landscape preservation at the Cummer Museum of Art," says landscape architect Mary Palmer Dargan. "She and her husband, David, love the location and had bought the house next to theirs to serve as a guesthouse, especially for visiting



A bulkhead wall along the St. Johns River provides space for Ann Hicks' parterre rose garden with brick edging, hedges, and crushed shell paths. Bluestone English steps lead from the grass terrace down to the rose garden.

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children and grandchildren, so my remarks about integrating old with new struck a chord."

The Hicks' 1928-vintage Cape Cod-style house where Ann grew up and the adjacent 1960s Georgian home are linked by a loggia designed by Atlanta architect Norman Askins. For Hugh Dargan Associates, a husband-and-wife landscape architecture team also based in Atlanta, the larger site issues drove the design: how to forge graceful connections and establish a clear hierarchy of spaces. And, too, how to make it all charming.

In the generous setback between the houses and the winding, scenic street leading past, driveways were consolidated with one entrance. The main loop leads to a guest parking area nosed toward the principal entry. An existing garage was separated and cut through with a drive aligned on axis with the new wishing well terrace and garden house. The effect is entrancing, and the line marks a clear progression to the guesthouse and its parking.

A walk at the wishing well leads through an oval terrace to the guesthouse entrance. Together, the new walks, terrace, and accents serve to create what Mary Palmer Dargan describes as "an air of fantasy" appropriate to a guesthouse. (The fact that the wishing well was once used in a romantic movie set and was purchased from the estate of Jack Warner in Bel Air, California, enriches the appeal.)

At the other end of the same axis, away from the guesthouse, a grass

Architect Norman Askins suggested dividing an existing garage with a drive that leads through to the guesthouse terrace and a new garden house. Mary Palmer Dargan's landscape plan links gardens, terraces, and interiors with axial views.



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walk leads to the original front lawn, now banked with trees and shrubs. The area was also surrounded by a privacy fence to make it feel like a secluded retreat.

On the property's waterside, a series of new and existing features takes advantage of views across the river to an impressive downtown skyline. Just outside the guesthouse, a grandly scaled classical arbor with limestone columns shelters a raised terrace and provides needed architectural focus for the extended facade.

Two steps down, an oval lawn crisply defined by low hedges leads, via a set of circular English steps, to a parterre rose garden at water's edge,



A stone wishing well purchased from the estate of movie mogul Jack Warner creates a romantic focal point along the walk leading to the Hicks' guesthouse entrance, alongside the garden house. The enclosed front garden is visible just beyond. Pennsylvania bluestone and Old Carolina wood-mold brick are used throughout to tie garden elements together.

made possible by a new bulkhead wall. The garden also features the hydrangeas that, along with roses, Ann loves to grow and use to decorate the house.

Farther along the river's edge are an existing swimming pool, nearby garden spaces deeply shaded by

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A robustly scaled arbor off the guesthouse over a raised bluestone-and-brick terrace provides a focal feature for the rambling riverside elevation and relates the newer structure to the original house, above. The two houses have been joined with a connecting loggia. Jacksonville landscape contractor Sunscapes fine-tuned plant selections to suit the riverside location.



live oaks, and a covered porch off the original house.

Throughout, the strong axes and focal points bring coherence to an otherwise pleasant ramble. Materials like wood-mold red brick and Pennsylvania bluestone in walks, terraces, steps, and edgings tie the diverse parts together.

"You get very different views and feelings from each location," says Ann, who says they tend to think of the original house, guesthouse, and extended grounds now as one big, comfortable place. In the garden is a smooth stone inscribed with an apt quotation from English writer Jonathan Swift: "I've often wished that I had clear for life, £600 a year, a handsome house to lodge a friend, a river at my garden's end."

It's an expansive New World river and a newly minted garden, but the pleasures and hospitality implied resonate nicely here centuries later. ♦

*For details, see Sourcebook.*