

# SWEET RETREATS

*Adding intrigue and value to landscapes in the Hamptons, garden structures emerge as a trend on East End estates.*

BY JEAN NAYAR



Like the landscape gardens cultivated on the grounds of English country manors in the 18th and 19th centuries, the rolling lawns of estates in the Hamptons often brim with brilliant beds of flowers, inviting winding paths, and enchanting garden structures that engage the eye and ignite the imagination. But unlike the Gothic ruins or classically inspired temples and pavilions that dotted aristocratic

English landscape gardens of yore, garden structures in the Hamptons today often lean more toward function than folly. Yet, whether situated on modestly scaled properties or larger estates of half a dozen acres or more, these built elements invariably add as much to the aesthetics of the landscape as they do practicality—and so they evoke something of the pastoral idyll of romantic English gardens. Nowadays, though, they are also likely to be reimagined to adapt to changing local lifestyle preferences.

Apart from classic garden structures, such as gazebos and pergolas that add character to many homes in the Hamptons, alternative garden features have begun to emerge on the East End and surrounding areas that take the pleasures of outdoor living in new directions. Everything from tree houses and teahouses to grape arbors and meditation rooms offer residents secluded get-aways or places of repose in their own backyards. These creative structures bring fresh form and function to landscapes—and they also add material and intangible value to properties overall.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON JUTRAS; ILLUSTRATION BY MARILAWA



This Indonesian-inspired poolside teahouse in a garden in Amagansett was built by Stiles Designs for an owner looking to entertain friends with afternoon tea or cocktails.





Inventive covered lounge seating (custom-designed by Lisa Gray of Gray Organschi Architecture) does double duty as architectural elements that define the borders of an entertaining area near the pool of a suburban New York property. Overhead, tensile wire frames support an accordionlike shade to shield the sun. Below, the landscape plan shows the positions of these features vis-à-vis other elements in the landscape.



In cooler seasons, the structural/seating pieces fold up and are illuminated from within to bring lanternlike sculptural interest to the lawn at night. The movable pieces can be detached and transported with the owners should they ever wish to move to a new home.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOBY JAYNES (PEACE TREEHOUSE)

“ADULTS WANT TREE HOUSES, TOO.... AS ESCAPES TO MEDITATE, PLAY CHESS, OR HAVE A GLASS OF WINE AND LOOK OUT AT THEIR PROPERTY.”

—JEAN STILES



he tree houses Jean and David Stiles (*stiles designs.com*) design and build in the Hamptons, for example, not only serve as special hangouts for children, but they’re also increasingly becoming hideaways for adults. “Kids love having a small-scaled

place to call their own, and we often build them with extras like furniture, periscopes, slides, and balloon launchers,” says Jean Stiles, who with her husband has produced myriad tree houses throughout the East End, including a two-level Hobbit-style house in East Hampton made of cedar and wrapped with a railing crafted of woven rope. “But adults want tree houses, too,” she explains. “They want them as escapes [where they can] meditate, play chess, or have a glass of wine and look out at their property.”

Although tree houses in the Hamptons may not be as common as they are in other parts of the country, Stiles sees them getting more nuanced as adults begin to appreciate their appeal as retreats. “Some people want them as a place to write their next novel or as a place to work or get away from clients,” she says. In addition to tree houses, the duo also creates other outdoor structures, such as potting sheds, playhouses, or fanciful teahouses, like the Indonesian-inspired one they built in the gardens of a home in Amagansett, where the owner wanted to entertain friends with afternoon tea or cocktails.

Simpler garden structures that landscape designer Vickie Cardaro of Buttercup Design Group (*Shelter Island Heights, 749-0101; buttercupdesigngroup.com*) sees popping up in the Hamptons include open-air trellises in vegetable gardens on larger properties. These structures are less quixotic than tree houses but just as appealing—particularly to foodies who enjoy indulging in an alfresco meal featuring freshly grilled vegetables grown and harvested in their own backyards. Highlighting this trend is a 30-foot-long grape arbor she designed, which is the centerpiece of a large enclosed vegetable garden with a fruit orchard on a sizable property in Shinnecock.

“We built the arbor to cover a farm table and chairs and set it amid raised beds of fruits, vegetables, and gravel paths,” Cardaro says. “We also included bamboo teepees for tomatoes, and we planted the boxes with nasturtiums for color and sweet alyssum to ward off aphids, offering an organic approach to pest control.” Cardaro also notes that the current variations of this type of structure “are now enclosed with couture fencing, not just chicken wire slapped onto metal posts.” The fencing she designed is made of six-inch clear cedar posts and caps with galvanized wire painted black. Additional benefits of garden structures like these are their low cost to construct and maintain versus other landscape elements, such as a pool and pool house or a tennis court.



Peace tree house, Amagansett.

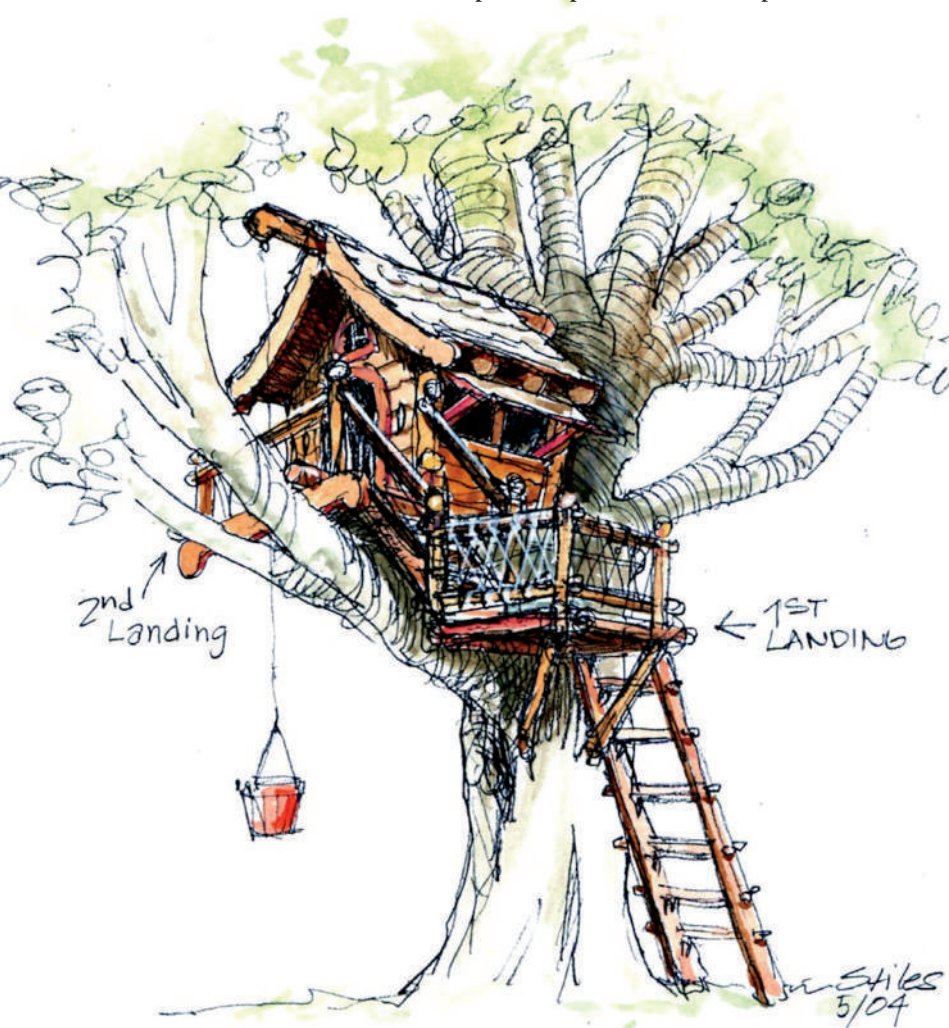




ometimes new variations of garden structures are crafted out of existing structures to adapt to a homeowner's current passion or hobby. Cardaro notes a Hamptonite she knows who converted a greenhouse into an exercise studio, for example. She's also seen newly built yet austere music rooms or drawing rooms that add mystery and interest to large wooded settings.

"One of the greatest things about garden structures is the element of surprise they can bring to large properties with walking paths," says Cardaro, whose other creative garden structures include a Jens Jensen-inspired "council ring" with a fire feature planned for a clearing of a wooded garden on the Shinnecock property. The owner there wants an area for respite and tranquility.

Other homeowners are turning to architects for creative custom solutions to outdoor living and entertaining needs. A multifaceted series of semi-enclosed furniture/light structures, designed and crafted by Elizabeth P. Gray and Alan Organschi of New Haven-based Gray Organschi Architecture ([grayorganschi.com](http://grayorganschi.com)) in collaboration with landscape architects Reed Hilderbrand ([reedhilderbrand.com](http://reedhilderbrand.com)), offers a case in point. "Our client wanted an area for socializing and entertaining in a backyard without a lot of room," Gray explains. "Since the client would only be entertaining outdoors seasonally, we wanted to make something that would be pleasing to look at in winter, too." The architects' solution was to create a series of what they call "lanterns," which are really overscale, custom-made canopied loungers composed like an open-air room around a courtyard and lighted at night. Inspired by Japanese bento boxes, these elements can also be folded up and repositioned as sculptural



This two-level Hobbit-style tree house in Amagansett is made of cedar with a railing crafted of woven rope, by Styles Designs. BELOW LEFT: A sketch of the house.



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—VICKIE CARDARO

PHOTO COURTESY BY JOSH LEHREER





Tree houses have evolved beyond kids' play spaces into whimsical, intricately constructed hide-aways for adults.

“IF YOUR HOUSE IS SET IN A MEADOW AND THE ARCHITECTURAL VERNACULAR IS MORE BARNLIKE, THEN STICK WITH THAT ARCHITECTURAL VOCABULARY FOR THE TREE HOUSE.”  
—JACK DELASHMET

THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMIE STILES (HOLLYWOOD TREE HOUSE); OPPOSITE PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON JUTRAS (MOON TREE HOUSE)



This “moon” tree house artfully integrates into the natural surroundings.

elements in the landscape off-season and illuminated in the evening to bring an enchanting glow to a snow-covered lawn. “The wonderful thing about bento boxes,” Gray says, “is you don’t really know what’s inside, so they have a kind of mystery, which makes these elements like English garden follies that attract the eye and draw it across the landscape.” Another bonus: The structures are temporary, so they can be transported with the owners should they ever wish to move.



Enhancing a property with garden structures like these requires plenty of forethought and, often, considerable expense if they’re going to be integrated artfully into the landscape. “You never want a secondary structure to look like it has fallen out of the blue,” says architect Joseph Eisner, of Eisner Design (28 Alewife Brook Road, East Hampton, 212-418-8400; eisnerdesign.com), who is based in Manhattan and East Hampton. “It should be part of an overall site plan and made part of an ensemble that relates to the main house yet has its own character and is integrated with vegetation.” Local codes may also impact the design of a garden structure. “An enclosed climate-controlled, year-round reading room with a foundation and a roof may fall into the accessory-building category and would need to follow setback regulations defined by the village or town,” he adds.

Prone as they are to aesthetic elitism, particularly given the history of the Hamptons as an enclave of some of the most highly regarded artists in the world, Hamptons residents are also likely to offer critiques on the style and placement of their neighbors’ garden structures. So carefully considering the form of a garden structure in the overall context of the property or broader environment is key to a happy outcome. “If your house is set in a meadow and the architectural vernacular is, say, a bit more barn-like, then stick with that architectural vocabulary,” says landscape architect Jack deLashmet (*Sagaponack, 537-8700; delashmet.com*), who has designed an array of garden structures for homes in the Hamptons, ranging from cabanas to follies. “Most likely the plantings and hardscape should be homogenous with the overall feel, and likely there should be repetition of surfaces used elsewhere on the property. On the flip side, I have seen some rustic older homes where the homeowner wanted a completely modern, glass/steel/airy structure that almost feels like a folly. If you go this route, a fantastically talented architect is probably key to making this work.”

The creative history of the Hamptons can just as readily yield positive influence from neighbors when it comes to garden structures. Filled as it is with clever designers and craftsmen, there’s no shortage of people willing to stoke the imagination with ever more inventive ways to make life here more magical—both indoors and out. **H**

## IN THE TREETOPS

There’s no need to trek to Disney World to experience the thrill of a Swiss Family Robinson–style tree house if you build one in your own backyard. For those who want to build a tree house, here’s some solid expert advice:

“If you want a glorified tree house that’s waterproof with operable windows, you may need to involve the building department,” says Jean Stiles, who has been building tree houses with her husband, David, for 25 years (*stilesdesigns.com*). Even simple structures are best built knowing a few tricks. “Trees are living things, so tree houses must be built with room for the tree to grow and to move with the wind,” adds David Stiles.

Companies like Stiles Designs or Pennsylvania-based Tree Top Builders (*treetopbuilders.net*) will design and build custom tree houses that can take four to six weeks or more to complete and can also cost \$10,000-plus to construct. For more complex designs, experts sometimes work with an arborist to be sure the tree is healthy and strong—and that expertise can add to the cost.

For a more affordable option, Stiles Designs offers tree house plans that handy Hamptonites can follow to build a tree house themselves, while Tree Top Builders hosts workshops that teach do-it-yourselfers the best tree house-building practices. Some companies, such as Treehouse Supplies (*treehousesupplies.com*) and Nelson Treehouse and Supply (*nelsontreehousesupply.com*) specialize in materials, tools, and accessories for DIY tree houses, while others offer ready-to-assemble kits.