

BALLARD PARK IN BLOOM REIMAGINING A VICTORIAN GARDEN IN WESTPORT

BALLARD PARK IS WESTPORT'S CENTERPIECE, a privately owned, publicly used space that slopes from Main Street down to Lake Champlain. It is a backdrop for entertainment, with a view of the water, a pavilion for performances, a skating rink, a beach and a changing house. It is also where my husband, Jigs, and I maintain a garden, one that the Ballard Park Foundation's board of directors approached us to design, implement and care for, beginning in 2002.

Jigs and I had just moved to Westport from Cape Breton Island, in Nova Scotia. A neighbor knew we were gardeners and was familiar with my books about heirloom flowers and

Clockwise from below:
Westport Inn garden, circa 1920. Today's garden, shown here in September, has all-season appeal. Russian sage.

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other plants, so recommended us to the board. Our challenge was to create a plan for an attractive low-maintenance garden with long-season interest. Our inspiration was the gorgeous gardens that once graced this park when it was part of the Westport Inn, built in 1887.

Guests from all over arrived to enjoy the inn, a luxurious and spacious four-storied wooden structure with a veranda, where visitors relaxed on rocking chairs and took in the grand scenery. Through the years the resort expanded, with outbuildings and cottages, tennis courts, croquet greens and extensive gardens that supplied cut flowers and fresh vegetables. The Westport Inn dominated town life, both in its physical presence and its economic impact. But by the 1950s, with changes in vacation habits, the inn's clientele dwindled. The place was finally demolished in 1966. Raymond C. Clark wrote in his *A View of Westport, New York, 1902–1972*, "At present the site is bare and every trace of the old foundation has been completely obliterated by land fill."

Fortunately, in the late 1970s, summer resident Anne "Petey" Cerf bought the property. A decade later her daughter, Liz Jones, persuaded her mother that the land would make a great town park and should be dedicated to the memory of Cerf's mother, Elizabeth Ballard, who had created a Ballard Park in Ridgefield, Connecticut. Since then the nonprofit Ballard Park Foundation has transformed and maintained this historic slice of Westport.

THE BALLARD PARK GARDEN was to occupy the property's upper level, previously used as a parking lot. Jigs sketched a design on the back of an envelope—a garden composed of a planted geometric framework of five-foot-wide borders in a 65-by-100-foot space.

I researched the plants that would fit with this design. They had to be hardy to Zone 4 (based on low winter temperatures of -20 degrees); drought, disease, insect and wind tolerant; and evoke the spirit of the Westport Inn. Although the main structure of the garden consisted of shrubs, there would be a perennial border at the back, facing Lake Champlain—we were mindful of framing the view, not obstructing it—and a packed, flowery

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planting in the circular bed, eventually graced with a sundial, the gift of a garden supporter. The idea was to avoid the formal, often sterile look of a conventional park planting. While I knew we could never establish the sort of high-maintenance beds of lofty delphiniums and hollyhocks that were the inn's hallmark, we wanted the garden to reflect its old-fashioned charm. This was a tall order considering that we could not draw on the sort of help the inn employed to tend its plantings. Jigs and I became the garden's sole custodians.

Our design would be implemented in three phases, each effective on its own. What we planted depended on available funds—Ballard Park raises money for the garden's upkeep. When we began work, our project proceeded just as we hoped it would. Today the planting is a mix of traditional Adirondack shrubs—Annabelle and peegee hydrangeas, burning bush and assorted spireas—and contemporary flowers—daffodils and tulips in spring, repeat-blooming day lilies, salvia, phlox, echinacea, hardy aster and Russian sage. These stalwarts bloom in yellows, purples, blues, pink and white, and overflow their beds for all-season interest. In winter the shrubby framework is etched with snow, so the garden never fades away.

Most of our work is done in May, when we rearrange plants, add to the garden, weed like madmen and water it. But there's constant fine-tuning through the end of autumn. It's our little baby, an ongoing project that we care for with love, as if it were in our own front yard.

Jigs and I are encouraged by the garden's admirers' kind words, and in its winter 2007 issue, the Massachusetts Audubon Society's *Sanctuary* magazine singled it out as an example of a public town common, a compliment to its harmonious integration of natural scenery, cultivated ground and generous green space set in the heart of Westport. 🌿

See Jo Ann and Jigs Gardner's *Gardens of Use & Delight: Uniting the Practical and Beautiful in an Integrated Landscape* (Fulcrum Publishing, www.fulcrum-books.com), illustrated by Elayne Sears, of Crown Point.