



Dynamic Duo

Q&A with Elizabeth Lear and Brian Mahoney of Lear & Mahoney Landscape Associates in Southampton.

by Alejandro Saralegui
photographs by Doug Young



HC&G: You're both lifelong gardeners. What's your earliest garden memory?

Elizabeth Lear: As a child I would watch my mom garden at our house in New Jersey. We wintered in Florida, and I have happy memories of my parents gardening there together. When I told my dad that, he laughed and said, "Are you kidding? We gardened together to save our marriage!"

Brian Mahoney: I remember visiting Old Westbury Gardens during the spring and picking snowdrops when no one was looking. And later I planted a garden at my parents' house that was a bit chockablock, with vegetables, Turk's cap lilies, balsam impatiens, and zinnias.

When did the two of you start working together?

BM: I was doing a lot of freelancing for a colleague in Cleveland, and because I had young children, I realized I needed something closer to home. Our first job was in 1995, and we've been together ever since.

Do you divvy up specific responsibilities between the two of you?

BM: Elizabeth is the creative genius behind everything, and I figure out how to make it happen!

EL: We divide and conquer. How we deal with clients sorts itself out on a case by case basis. We debate very well, and we don't take anything too seriously. The collaborative process is very positive. Sometimes the creative vision happens very quickly on site, but many times a project begins with information from the architect, a [survey](#), the clients' requirements, and so forth.

How full-service is your firm?

EL: We do everything, depending on what a client might want: from concept to final plans, site evaluations, furnishings, and brokering the plant material. We love supervising a project, and actually insist on it. I enjoy drawing, too, but it just takes so much time, and clients don't want to pay for it. Now there's no paper in the office. It's all computerized.

BM: Sometimes we even [telecommute](#) with our clients and let them work on the plans from the comfort of their home or office.



What makes a project interesting to you?

BM: An interesting client.

EL: Someone who has a real vision, which often brings out the best decision-making on a project. And I love older sites with great architecture, and even the sow's ear that we need to turn into the proverbial silk purse.

If you could choose a public space in the Hamptons to redesign, what would it be?

EL: Would the Shalimar Gardens in Lahore, Pakistan, count? There are 410 fountains, and sadly about three-quarters of them don't have any water. Closer to home, the street trees are dreadful in Southampton. It would be better to cut them down and start over with saplings.

Do you ever get garden envy?

EL: Sometimes when you're on a property you think, Would I want to live here? We have a client on Town Line Road and the ocean, and often I think that. The house is meant to feel like it has been dropped into the field. The homeowner likes weeds and grasses. We've even swept sand up to the deck.

BM: Which is actually harder to achieve than one thinks. Even the rose growing through the privet looks right there: a rambler that does well at the shore.

EL: You can't always let nature do what she wants. It's all about editing, with a vision in mind. The mugwort is bad, but the Queen Anne's lace is good.