

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONAL



In an office painted a startling shade of what she calls "Kodak yellow" and decorated with plants in huge pots and stacks of gardening books, Elizabeth Lear swings her small feet from a stool and talks about her work as an independent landscape designer.

A petite but energetic middle-aged woman with a throaty voice and a silver-banded bob, Lear is the founder, principal, and lifeblood of Lear Landscape Associates in Southampton, New York. She has one employee and occasionally hires extra workers and independent contractors to build the gardens she designs.

Lear, who studied Landscape Architecture at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, has a fierce, lifelong passion for gardening. She doesn't consider her work glamorous -- even though it's creative and brings her inside the estates of the rich and famous -- but she does say that working for herself satisfies her urge "to attain a greater degree of perfection."

Landscape design is about the transformation of space, and Lear must often reconceive barren or unkempt sites as formal Italianate or English gardens, a meadow of wildflowers, an apple orchard, an allee of tall privet hedges or a sleek patio with ball-shaped shrubs, a gazebo, and stone urns sprouting roses or begonias.

By Elizabeth Collins

As an independent professional, Lear both handles the niggling details of design and construction and fulfills her clients' and her own aesthetic needs. She deals with architects and lawyers and obtains the zoning permits often required to install gardens. She drafts design plans and construction plans, supervises the installation of the plantings, and makes sure that the gardens are maintained and updated as necessary.

Landscape design is done in stages, she explains. Certain plants can only be put in the ground at certain times of year. Other work, such as digging, must usually wait until the hard winter ground has thawed. Finally, designer and client must wait for the plants to grow in order to gauge the true effect of the garden.

When it's hot in the Hamptons, superstar summer residents lounge by their swimming pools in delicious privacy, shielded from public view by eight-foot hedgerows, Byzantine gardens, and splendid shrubbery. Alas, local estates don't always come equipped with these living defense systems. That's why they hire somebody like IP landscape designer Elizabeth Lear to design and plant them...

"The timing is always different, and gardens change," says Lear. "They look different at different times of year. And gardens have 'rooms' in them. Sometimes clients will return to me looking to change the feel of a certain room."

A constant consideration for Lear is the architecture of the house on the site where she is working. "My work always has to address the existing or planned architecture," she says. "And, of course, each client has different wants—for example, they might have a certain color scheme in mind, such as an all-white garden, or lots of purple flowers. Plus, there are the considerations of the site itself. Is it sloped? What kind of soil does it have? Is it a waterfront piece of property?"

Lear finds her work most exciting when her clients "have a real horticultural and design interest," she says. "Then you have the challenge of creating an aesthetic with them." But whether her clients know a dandelion from a daisy or not, Lear faces a broader challenge familiar to all independent professionals.

"You have to unravel the needs of the client," she says. "They look for so much in a garden, and you have to figure out what will make them happy. And, of course, people always expect instant gratification. You have to remind them that it takes patience, effort and know-how to create perfect things."

Not surprisingly, Lear says the main drawback of working solo is billing -- namely, collecting on a timely basis the money owed to her. "You have to deal with the risks," she says, "and there is the continual pressure of securing new jobs while also covering your expenses."

A "driving anxiety" motivates Lear to keep watch for new clients. In a small area such as the Hamptons, independent professionals often worry that one day they'll simply run out of business. Of course, "properties out here change hands frequently," Lear says, "and the new owners will call me ready to do their own thing to the site."

After several years on her own, Lear has developed lasting relationships with several clients, too. They call her every so often to do more work on their property or just to change things around.

When Lear went to work for herself in 1987, she "started really



small, with just one project -- siting a pool and doing gardens and terracing." She laughs and says, "I just jumped right in. Before I started on my own, I had managed a landscaping company. But I wanted to do things my way."

She had also seen larger landscaping companies make a lot of mistakes and knew that she could offer clients more thorough service than designers working for retail garden centers could. "They don't develop complete plans," she says. "They only put things in the ground. I handle everything, from design to maintenance."

Still, says Lear, "it's a gamble. It always is when you're working on your own. I call it the plight of the self-employed -- you never know if next week you'll be able to pay your expenses."

But work often begets work; Lear doesn't even advertise. "The longer you're in business, the more business you get," she says optimistically. Lear says she gets her new projects mainly through referrals, the fruit of consistent good work. "Perfection is what's important with a small business," she explains. There is a greater margin for error when you work for a large company."

She adds, "It's always hard in the beginning. In the long run, that's when you reap the pleasures of working for yourself. But it takes a few years to get established."

By now, Lear herself ranks among the established, and she is often called upon by book and magazine editors scouting for exquisite gardens.

Martha Stewart Living recently published a story on "container planting" and illustrated it with photo spreads of old, galvanized pails and tubs filled with herbs planted by Lear herself at Martha Stewart's East Hampton home. Also pictured in the March issue of MSL is a wisteria trellis that Lear designed and built for a client in nearby Bridgehampton. Architectural Digest will show the formal gardens of one of Lear's clients in its May issue.

"It's second-hand credibility, really," Lear says of the publicity she gets when her work is featured in books and magazines. "They're not much more than shopping guides. You don't get jobs after your work is featured in them. "But," she laughs, "people will call me and ask where they can buy the containers I used, or

something like that."

Lear owes her success in part to horticulture's current fashionableness. People today are more informed about and interested in plants and gardens, she says. "This is a great industry now," she says, "and that makes it even more fun to create gardens."

Regardless of profession, Lear says working independently isn't for everyone. "Some people just aren't good at working independently and taking full responsibility for their actions," she says.

In her own case, Lear says the rewards have justified the burdens of independence: a new client recently bought a property that she had designed and landscaped for the previous owner. "They told me that they bought the house because of the garden," Lear says. "A comment like that feels so good. It makes you forget -- for a moment, at least -- what a struggle it was to build up your business."

Elizabeth Collins is a freelance writer based in East Quogue, New York. She'll begin a master's program at the Iowa Writers' Workshop next year.

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