

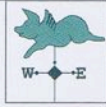
house & gardener

How a one-time graphic designer found his true calling in the soil of the South Fork, then put his talents to work on an old carriage house. BY STEPHEN HENDERSON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURIE LAMBRECHT

Nowadays, landscape designer Craig Socia has some of the South Fork's most prestigious gardens under his (green) thumb. That's the last thing he envisioned a few years ago when he planted a few foxgloves in the yard of a Hamptons summer rental. Unlike seeds, you see, one can't always predict how a career will germinate. ¶ Back in the early 1990's, Socia, 38, was the art director at *Business Week* magazine. Along with a group of friends, he'd leased a house from the sister of Victoria Fensterer, a legendary gardener best known for her restoration of the landscape surrounding Grey Gardens, the summer house of Ben Bradlee and Sally Quinn. ¶ When Fensterer saw Socia's simple but elegant horticulture, she offered him a part-time job on the spot. "I thought I'd make a few extra bucks to pay off my Amex bill,

Made In The Shade | Garden designer Craig Socia's East Hampton property, inside and out, is a showcase for his design thinking. A shady backyard retreat (OPPOSITE) shows off his furniture and a lofty hexagonal arbor. The arbor is covered with two rose varieties, Eden Climber and New Dawn. See Resources.





but I fell in love with Victoria's garden," he says with a laugh. "Suddenly I thought, do I really want to spend the rest of my life on the 39th floor of the McGraw-Hill building, breathing recycled air?"

Socia moonlighted with Fensterer for another summer before leaving *Business Week* and Manhattan to live on the East End year-round. "Hamptons people tend to be very focused on how their property appears in June, July and August. But I needed to learn what a garden looks like during all four seasons."

Three years ago, he purchased a former carriage house, built in 1909, located slightly north of East Hampton village. Stucco-clad, its hipped roof and classic proportions charmed Socia. "The place was a wreck, though, and completely overgrown with bittersweet vines," he recalls.

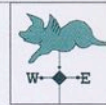
Drawing on a few courses in drafting and architecture he'd taken in college, Socia invested a full year in renovation. While the surrounding landscape took shape, inside the house, a dirt-floored entryway blossomed into a cozy salon; the existing kitchen was pruned into a dining room; and the living room flowered into a sleek kitchen.

When Pigs Fly | A garage (TOP) was converted into a compact work space for Socia, who also built the stone columns and the densely-covered arbor. A flying pig weathervane tops the structure. **Guarded Entrance** | Life-size reindeer topiaries (MIDDLE) stand sentinel on Socia's lawn. A triple-decker hedge bems in the space. **Sticks And Stones** | Socia's design firm uses Eastern Red Cedar branches (BOTTOM) to create rustic outdoor seating. **Bird's Eye View** | A whimsical bird feeder (OPPOSITE) as seen from the kitchen. See Resources.









Appropriately enough for this new Eden, Socia cohabits with a mad menagerie of animals, which he calls “the taxidermy collection.” Everywhere one looks there are hides, horns and heads of zebra, crocodiles, mahi-mahi, water buffalo, roe (a small alpine deer), impala and faux mink.

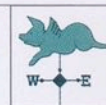
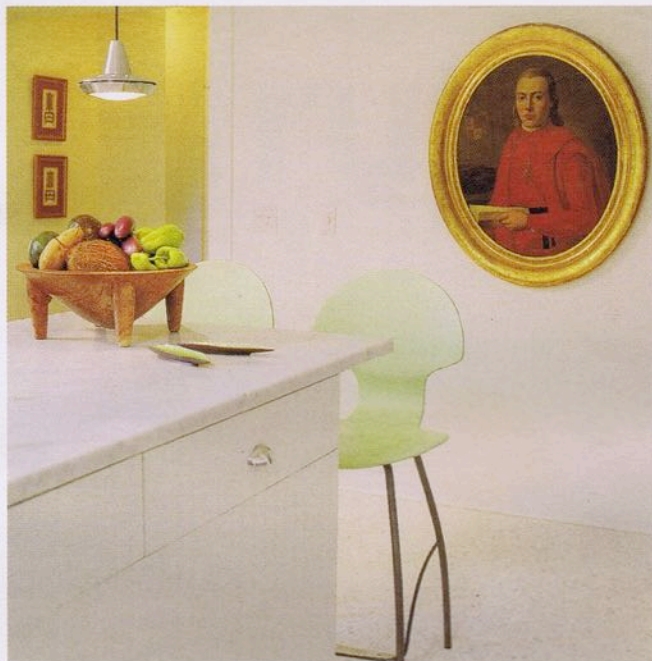
Socia quickly admits that he didn’t fell any of these trophies on his own. No, as his wealth of eclectic furnishings and objet d’art attest, Socia is more likely to stalk prey at hunting grounds such as the Clignancourt flea market in Paris. In fact, after the long summer months he spends planning, planting, and—as he often puts it—“fluffing” landscapes in the Hamptons, he travels far afield during the winter months. Last year, he spent seven weeks in New Zealand, Fiji and Australia where, in Adelaide, he bagged a magnificent dining table made of Tasmanian Blackwood. This stark, severely lustrous piece now sits beside a pair of gaudy, silver chairs designed by Gianni Versace.

Taking such risks in his interior décor seems to steel Socia’s nerves for making even bolder leaps in the great outdoors. He tries to instill similar courage in his clients.

“It’s peculiar, really. The same person who has no trouble tearing down a wall to double the size of a

Ticking Time | In the living room (OPPOSITE), Persian Heriz rugs enliven the space. A settee from English Country Antiques is covered in Ralph Lauren Home fabric. **Bath Path** | Lush plants and towels (TOP) by the outdoor shower. **Wild Things** | Navy Donghia mobair (MIDDLE) covers a chair in the living room. **Fair Game** | The zebra upholstery (MIDDLE AND BOTTOM) is dyed pony skin from Edelman. See Resources.





room, can't imagine a tree could be relocated, or removed. This is where I come in," Socia says. "I try to convince them anything's possible, as long as they can tell me what it is they love to look at."

To accomplish such soothsaying, he frequently brings clients to his own yard. Here, a narrow hedgerow pathway leads to an outdoor shower and a shade garden of elephant ear caladium, hostas and ostrich ferns. A pair of topiary reindeer gambol in front of a triple-decker hedge made up of privet, yew and boxwood. By stepping through an antique wrought-iron gate—salvaged from Socia's first apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn—one sees a hexagonal arbor covered with two types of rose, Eden Climber and New Dawn. Beneath this pink canopy sits whimsically rustic outdoor furniture of Socia's own design, made from Eastern Red Cedar branches.

"This really is my studio," he says, while ruffling the leaves of an enormous boxwood sphere. "As we walk around here together, I make those little circles on my landscape drawings come alive in people's imaginations."

In other words, Craig Socia passes on the exquisite secrets of plant life given to him by his mentor, Victoria Fensterer. The student is now the professor. And so, leaf by leaf, does the garden grow. 🌻

Heating Up | Given the roaring fireplace, there's always something cooking in this kitchen (OPPOSITE). The sleek stainless steel cupboards and stools are by Boffi. **Open Up** | Brown Jordan furniture (TOP) makes the patio. **Contrast** | An antique portrait (MIDDLE) keeps watch in the kitchen. **Heads Up** | The dining room boasts a Tasmanian Blackwood table (BOTTOM) and Gianni Versace chairs. See Resources.