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A Taste For Taming Nature

Published: Tuesday, June 14, 2011

By Kathryn Boughton

Clive Lodge is a happy man. He discovered early what he wanted to do with his life and has had the good fortune to follow that ambition across the Atlantic from his native England to enjoy growing success in Northwest Connecticut.

Mr. Lodge, a horticulturalist, provides landscape design and installations through his eponymous firm, based in Cornwall Bridge. Such has been his reception in this country that this year, after only five years as an independent contractor, he expanded his tiny staff by one-third, adding Deirdre Monica as his third associate as he labors to keep up with the demands of some 20 clients. About half that client base consists of properties he serves on a regular basis, including significant estates such as those owned by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and interior designers Bunny Williams and Robert Couturier.



The South Kent home of Robert Couturier and Jeffrey Mrgan, framed by their parterre garden. Photos by Kathryn Boughton.

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Mr. Lodge is used to dealing with high-profile clients, having built his career in England. "At 12 I had a greenhouse, selling plants to the neighbors," he said. "I left school at 15 and started work in a public park in northern England. I found I had more in common with nature than with big groups of people. I was that kid who was always working with the soil."

He received on-site training and took college courses before he transferred to a technical college to become a horticulture technician. After four years, he formed a small landscaping company serving private and commercial clients in his native Yorkshire.

In 1987, Mr. Lodge was appointed head gardener by a prominent English entrepreneur in Hampshire, England. While renovating and reorganizing this garden, he was covered by the national press, and, in 1991, he moved to Hoveton Hall in Norfolk, England, as head gardener, developing the estate's 20-acre grounds into a popular tourist attraction.

After that, he was recruited by fashion designer Oscar de la Renta upon the recommendation of the late Rosemary Verey, an internationally known English garden designer and writer. Mr. Lodge and his wife, Diane, moved to Mr. de la Renta's Kent estate, where he managed the 55-acre garden for nine years.

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"But after nine years I had different fields I wanted explore," he said, "so I formed Clive Lodge LLC."

The firm has grown steadily since then, attracting clients who rely on his planning and maintenance skills. "It's like spinning plates, keeping up with everything this time of year," Mr. Lodge said. "We've got a lot going on. Right now, we are working 60- and 70-hour weeks. But we will wind up around Christmas and lay off for the winter—that's when Diane and I go to England to see the grandkids. Then, in February, I start planning and organizing for the coming year."

Even while on vacation, his mind is always on his gardens and what he can bring back to his American clients. "When we go to England, I visit the top gardens, and when we went to Savannah I went to see Pearl Fryar, who is self-taught, but who creates the most unbelievable topiaries—it's like he works with a divine eye."

Just as he calls on the expertise of others in continuing to learn and expand his skills, he shares those skills with his workers. He is high on his team, lauding the young people he has chosen to work with him. Jeffrey Merritt, a young man Mr. Lodge has trained from scratch, has worked with him for four years, and has a "magic natural eye" for topiaries and boxwood hedges.

He has been joined this spring by Ms. Monica, who previously worked at the Kent Greenhouse & Gardens and who possesses "fabulous plant knowledge," according to her employer. Mr. Lodge said their skills and reliability makes it possible for him to dispatch his associates to different sites, confident in the fact that the work will be competently and quickly done.

That is an essential factor when dealing with properties of substantial size and complexity owned by people of taste and style. Gesturing to the grounds surrounding Mr. Couturier's South Kent home, Mr. Lodge said, "When I first came here, there was nothing here. Robert is French and I said, 'Do you want Versailles?' and he responded, 'Of course, darling.' I understand Robert because he's a European like me. So, I created all these parterre gardens."

The parterres are perfect in their symmetry and enhanced by the quiet geometry and sleek lines that Mr. Lodge has established in other plantings around the grounds. "I like simplicity," he said. "I like the clean forms of the boxwoods—everything falls in line with the buildings and the flatness of the boxwood reflects the flatness of the hornbeam trees."

He pointed to a neatly pruned line of apple trees that line the drive, and remarked that they will never be allowed to grow taller or to branch out more. "In that way, they are almost like Bonsai trees," he said, adding that the trees bear bountiful fruit each year.

He said that topiary and parterre hedges probably symbolize man's control over nature. Why would anyone trim a tree in such a way that it looks like something else? "Because I can," Mr. Lodge quipped. "My job is not to work with nature, it's to bring it into submission."

But the truth is, he loves the effect his mastery over nature produces, enjoying thoroughly the contrast between dark soil and shiny green leaves. "Boxwood is kind of my signature," he said. "I do perennial gardens, but not as much. A parterre is a more sculptural kind of beauty. When the hedges have been clipped and the leaves are dark and shiny and people say, 'Oh, my God!', that's what I like."

But it is not all a matter of control. On the Couturier property, Mr. Lodge helped to reclaim a hilltop area that had suffered from the blow-down of several large hemlocks when wind whipped across the knoll from South Spectacle Lake. The area has now been turned into a woodland garden using softly unobtrusive native plants. Trees are also being re-established, giving a verdant feel to the spot, where a visitor can stop and rest on a bench.

"This garden is a miracle because there is so little soil," he said. "This is a success story because everything had to be planted with a crow bar. The trees we have planted are small so their roots can grip to the rock." He added that as they grow, their numbers will help to protect each other from future wind damage. "We're planting for the future," he concluded.

Farther along, near the front of the estate, he said that he is helping to create a cottage garden around an early 18th-century house being restored by Mr. Morgan. "[Mr. Morgan] is into early American history," Mr. Lodge said. "We are talking about an apothecary garden of herbs."

He noted that the highly mobile world population allows clients to see other types of gardens and plants during their travels. When they bring home these ideas it becomes his job to translate them to this environment with plants that mimic the originals but that can survive New England winters. "I'm the plant whisperer," he jokes.

For Mr. Lodge, the natural world—and the not so natural installations he sometimes creates—offers never-ending possibilities. "I have always liked challenges and this is a challenge that never ends," he said. "The difference between a good garden and a bad garden is about six weeks of doing nothing."

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Clive Lodge LLC is located at 355 Kent Road in Cornwall Bridge. He can be reached by phone at 860-672-6099, or by e-mail at info@clivelodge.net.

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