

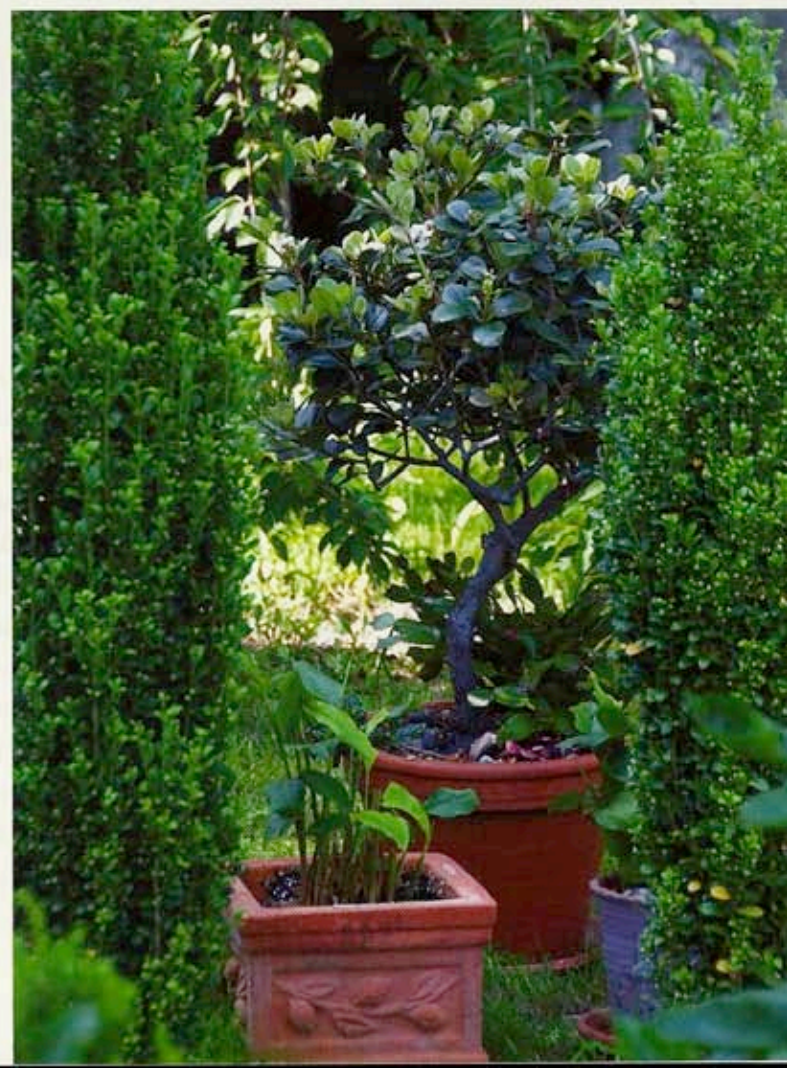
carved by nature

Martha's Vineyard artist Ruth Kirchmeier's intricate woodcuts reflect the multi-layered beauty of her gardens.

text and photos by jane booth



Bursting with vitality and beauty, the artist's island gardens are bold canvases that reflect her artistic sensibilities.





The artist's gardens are ever-changing tapestries of colorful perennials, intricately textured shrubs, and beach grasses brightened with whimsical surprises such as potted houseplants.

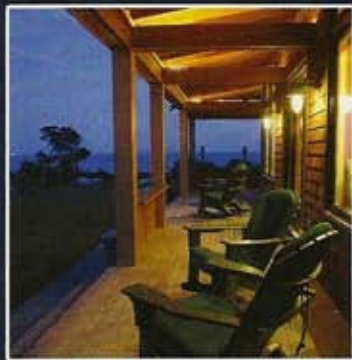
Ruth Kirchmeier's garden reveals the sensibilities of a woodcut artist. A multi-layered canvas of hollies and yews, flowing grasses, and intricately shaped perennials, this Martha's Vineyard's artist's Eden is a tapestry of shape and line—much like the woodcarver's evocative pieces. Like the landscape designer she is, Kirchmeier chips away into flat fields of pine blocks, carving scenes that capture the imagination. For instance, a simple vignette of her dining room, where a forsythia-filled vase is placed on a red runner, radiates with the nature's strength and energy.

Kirchmeier has spent many hours sitting in the front of a canoe while her partner, former *New York Times* outdoors columnist Nelson Bryant, paddles through the wilds of Maine. "I bring small sketch pads with me," says Kirchmeier. "At first I would sketch the trees around the edge of the river, and then I started noticing the water, and how it has geometry and how it is always changing. I began drawing the water. When I came home I thought, I can translate these into woodcuts."



At a retrospective held on the occasion of her 70th birthday, Kirchmeier wrote about her work. "At the end, I thanked Nelson for taking me to worlds of 'wildness and wet,'" she says. "I grew up always loving the natural world, but Nelson permitted me to go places I would never have gone in my life."

Evidence of living off the land decorates the back entrance to the couple's island home, with clam rakes and baskets, fishing nets and grill grates, and various pairs of worn waders hanging



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and making a garden," says
the Martha's Vineyard artist.

upside down. Nelson is the vegetable grower and hunter-gatherer bringing home fish and other tidbits from the sea. Kirchmeier, as cook, has created a midden of pottery shards outside her kitchen door.

Kirchmeier's gardens are full of whimsical surprises, reflecting an artist's unbounded curiosity. House plants are welcome winter friends that find places to reside outside come summer. A topiaried myrtle came to Kirchmeier by way of her art dealer, Hermine Hull, who runs a nearby West Tisbury gallery, Hermine Merel Smith Fine Art.

"One winter she asked me to look after her myrtle and I nurtured it and shaped it. When I brought it back, she asked if I wouldn't like to keep it permanently," Kirchmeier says.

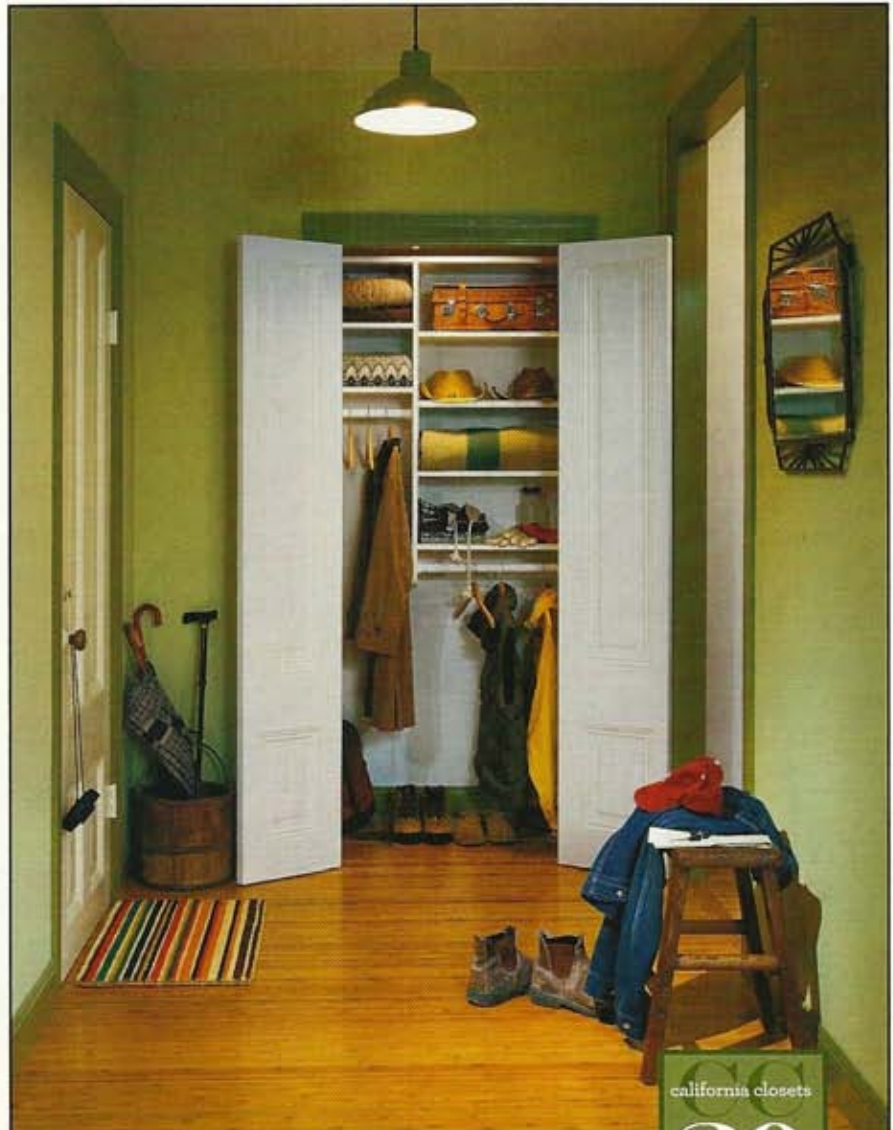
A potted plant she calls a fan iris is also intriguing. "You think it is just one of the leaves going up and then it makes a pod at the end of the leaf," she says. "The pod opens and the flower lasts a day: it is a yellow fleur-de-lis with huge sepals with pale white and purple in the middle. It is just beautiful."

Species tulips in crimson red, salmon, and yellow share space with small pots of succulents. Kirchmeier has also planted spiny cactus, bringing to mind some of the architectural elements of her woodcuts.



"Where I grew up in New Jersey, we didn't have any running water or electricity and I could not speak English," she says. "It was a small enclave of German socialists who first lived in New York City, and then bought land in the Ramapo Mountains near a newly created reservoir.

"On weekends, we took walks in the vast wilderness and there were outcroppings of cedar trees and native cacti that bloomed at a certain time of year. Three years ago, a nursery on the Vineyard was selling yellow and pink cacti and against my better judgment, I bought some. They are lethal, but I just had such a nostalgia for them. I thought I'd be sorry I did that, but I'm not. They look great."



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Both common and unusual perennials have served as inspiration for Kirchmeier's exquisite woodcuts.


It's not uncommon for Kirchmeier to take cuttings—a snippet of fern, a bit of juniper—to root, pot, and then baby each plant in cold frames until they are big enough to fend for themselves. She coaxed box, yew, and hollies as well as her larger columnar trees to grow with typical care and fortitude. “I hope within my lifetime they get big enough so I can walk amongst them and they will be taller than I am,” she says.

The patience she has cultivated in her garden is also reflected in the intricate artistry of her woodcuts. The process begins with a small pen-and-ink sketch, transferring what she has seen in nature to the bare surface of a master block.

Next, she begins the long, laborious journey of carving into the wood, using lines and textures to convey her stories. Replicas of the master block follow. Weeks pass before Kirchmeier is ready make a print and even then she will rework her idea. No two prints are the same.



Kirchmeier's printing technique has parallels to gardening as well. "I don't see the difference between making a woodcut and making a garden," says Kirchmeier. "You need the skills to cut the wood and make a garden—the same things go into it. You have to place things so there is depth and interest and a certain desire to see what's happening. If you look at one of my woodcuts you say, 'Oh, I want to be there and walk around that room' or 'I want to see that river.' I hope when you look at my garden, it is just as inviting."

Ruth Kirchmeier's woodcuts are handled by Hermine Merel Smith Fine Art Gallery, 548 Edgartown Road, West Tisbury, 508 693-7719. 

Jane Booth is a freelance photographer and writer who summers in Chatham.

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