

*In spring, the delicate blooms of chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) bring surprising beauty to the bulb garden.*

# garden

## 365

Using conifers as their mainstay, a Middleton couple has created a yard they can enjoy year round.

**By Kathryn Kingsbury**  
Photos by Jamie L. Forrest

(spring)

**F**rom its humble beginnings as a lawn, the landscape around the Middleton home of Sandy and Dennis Allen has been reborn as a haven for migrating songbirds, the occasional mallard and more than 100 varieties of evergreens.

The Allens never really thought of themselves as gardeners. Sandy's not even sure when they first started converting the expanse of grass behind their house into a shrub-strewn sanctuary. Maybe it was 1994 when they put in the native serviceberry and highbush cranberry plants, hoping to lure birds so the view from the rear window would be more tantalizing than a flat green carpet. And it was probably 1996 before they put in their first evergreen.

But their garden has transformed them. They are active members of the American Conifer Society and the Wisconsin Hardy Plant Society (Sandy serves on the board of directors of the Hardy Plant Society) and volunteer weekly at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum's Longenecker Horticultural Gardens. Sandy spent three years working towards certification as a Master Gardener from the UW-Dane County Extension and now spends the growing season working in the trees and shrubs department at America's Best Flowers in Cottage Grove.

For one week in the spring, the Allens' side porch is lined with hundreds of four-by-four-inch plant pots holding trees small enough to fit into the palm of one's hand, washtubs brimming with water lilies and flats of perennials and vegetable plants, which they sell to raise money for gardening organizations.

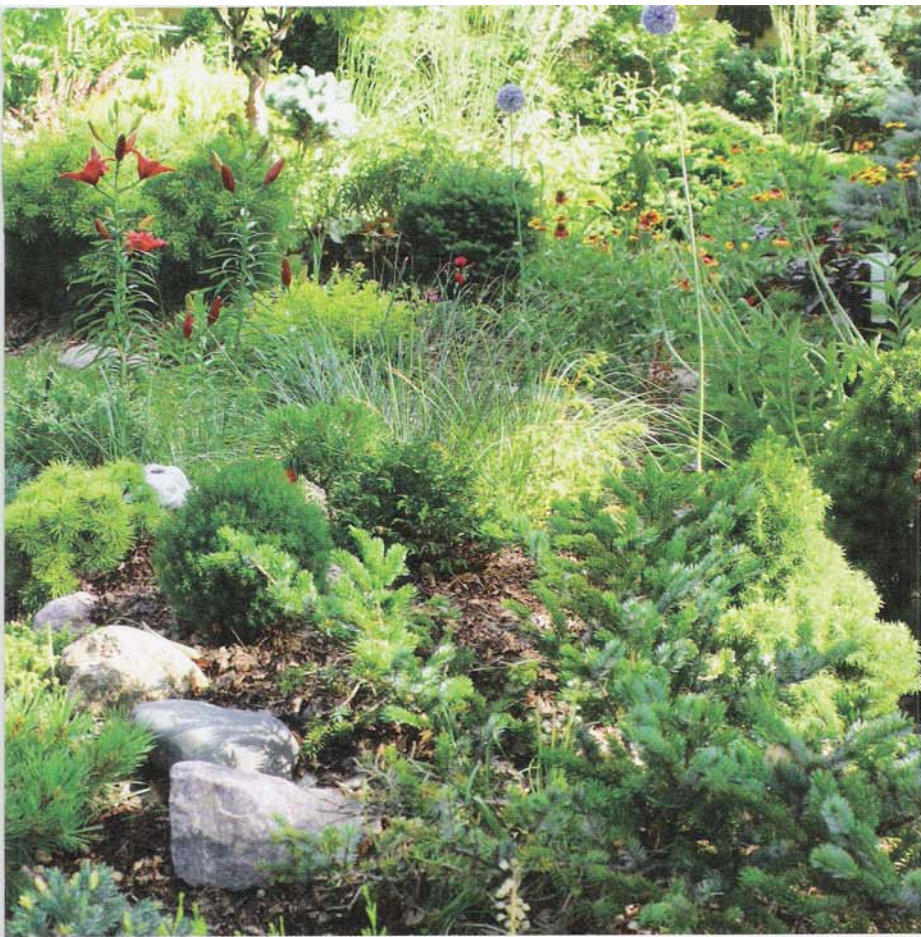
Sandy laughs when she tells the story of how she and her husband became plant junkies. It happened one evening at Olbrich Botanical Gardens as they listened to a presentation by Ed Hasselkus, curator of Longenecker Gardens. The talk was entitled "Creating Year-Round Interest with Conifers," and, as she remembers it, "we actually almost didn't go because we thought it was going to be about Christmas



**Above:** The plum-colored leaves of Pissard, or purple-leaved, plum (*Prunus cerasifera* 'Atropurpurea') add 3-season color to the garden, while the branch tips of Sunkist eastern arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Sunkist'), give off a golden glow. **Below left:** Globemaster ornamental garlic, (*Allium giganteum* 'Globemaster') puts on a fireworks display in late spring. Producing large dense flowerheads in full sun, it takes a looser form when grown in partial shade. **Below right:** The Allens' miniature conifer forest is interspersed with hybrid and species tulips. **Bottom:** A female mallard takes a dip in the Allens' pond, bottom, which is framed by variegated sweet flag (*Acorus calamus* variegatus) and stonecrop (*Sedum* spp.).



(summer)



trees.” But the dozens of plant varieties featured in Hasselkus’ slide show spanned the spectrum of sizes, shapes and colors – some conifers looked more gold or blue than “evergreen.” By the time Sandy and Dennis left Olbrich that evening, they had morphed into true devotees of needle-leaved plants.

And so they began, one plant at a time, to fill their outdoors with conifers of every form and habit. “We started out by putting [a plant] where there was space, and then transplanting other things to make it look like they all belonged there,” Sandy says. “[Gardening]’s an ongoing thing. It’s not like it’s perfect. Part of the fun of it is looking back and thinking ‘I don’t like [that plant] where it is’ and moving it around like your living-room furniture. We’re not planting for 50 years down the line, we’re planting for instant pleasure.” The Allens admit that they occasionally lose plants that can’t adjust to the climate or moving. But Sandy takes it in stride. “If in 10 years we have to dig out a hundred-dollar conifer, we figure that’s 10 bucks a year,” she says. Compare that to the price of annuals and it’s not a bad deal at all.

Conifers are not the only class of plants in the Allens’ garden, but they are its heart, keeping the landscape alive throughout the year. In the dead of winter, when other trees resemble skeletons, most conifers remain lush with fine leaves. (Bald Cypress (*Taxodium* spp.) and larch (*Larix* spp.) are among the exceptions that drop leaves in autumn and refoliate in the spring.) And evergreens serve as veritable condos for wildlife in the winter, when their needles protect creatures from blasts of bitter cold. “We wanted to have more of a winter garden,” Sandy says. “When you spend at least four months of the year looking at dirt, it’s rather boring.”

With a standard postage-stamp yard and a large maple already shading much of the lot, the Allens quickly realized they couldn’t fit in many more full-size trees. So they started searching out dwarf and miniature varieties of their favorite species. (Dwarf conifers are those that grow one to six inches a year and reach no more than six feet by their 10th birthday, according to the American Conifer Society. Miniatures grow a maximum of one inch a year and, at the end of a decade, are less than a foot tall.) A hillock no more than a few yards long, near the Allens’ garage, easily holds dozens of specimens, none more than 30 inches high, but most hovering around half a foot. The Allens’ craze for diminutive trees has spread to deciduous ones, as well, as evidenced by



**Clockwise from top:**

- The conifer garden includes small-scale spruces (*Picea bicolor* ‘Howell’s dwarf Tiger Tail’ and *Picea glauca* ‘Rainbow’s End’), a false cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* ‘Minivarigata’), pines (*Pinus flexilis* ‘Ginger Quill’ and *Pinus contorta* ‘Willow Creek’) and red and white cedars (*Juniperus squarata* ‘Floriant’ and *Thuja occidentalis* ‘Teddy’). The lanky purple flowers are *Allium caeruleum*.

- Birds aren’t the only winged wildlife who visit the Allens’ garden.

- Delicate, daisy-like fleabane (*Erigeron* spp.) is native to Wisconsin.

- The pink puffs on this smokebush (*Cotinus coggygria* ‘Velvet Cloak’) aren’t flowers, but rather elongated stems, each about the width of a hair.





Goblin blanket flower  
(*Gaillardia x grandiflora*  
'Goblin') bursts with  
blooms from June to  
September.

(fall)



**Coppery chrysanthemums, top, add warmth to the autumn garden. Evergreens, below, are still going strong.**

four dwarf ginkgos they recently introduced into their landscape.

Evergreens are only one part of the Allens' formula for year-round beauty. Red-twig dogwoods produce foamy white flowers in the spring, lush variegated white and green leaves in the summer, then put on a real show all winter with their cherry-red bark. Ornamental grasses sway in summer breezes, then stand stalwart through sleet and snow.

And the hardscape – those architectural elements that are to the garden as bones are to the human body – holds everything together. A pedestal on the back porch holds a wide stone basin that doubles as a birdbath and fountain. A lily pad floats on its surface; cranes stand poised at the basin's center, ready to catch imaginary fish. A man-made creek meanders

*continued on page 66*



**Above: The fiery leaves of Korean maple (*Acer pseudosieboldianum*), bottom left, bring brighter color than most blooms. The dwarf river birch (*Betula nigra* 'Little King'), right, has begun to lose its leaves, revealing shaggy bark beneath. The dwarf white pine (*Pinus strobus* 'Blue Shag') in front of it is as luxuriantly green as ever.**

*Garden 365 ... continued from page 64*

downhill over gray pebbles and past lush patches of low-growing sedum to a pond not much bigger than a hot tub. A short wooden bridge invites visitors to hover above the surface, brush against the sword-shaped leaves of variegated sweet flag and dip their toes into the water.

On the other side of the pond, pavers inlaid with brightly stained glass in the shapes of irises, cardinals and suns that lead past tiny Turkmenistan tulips, lacy-leafed peonies, intoxicating tea roses, deep blue bachelor's buttons, towering lilacs and, of course, a score more evergreens, including a yellow-tipped chamaecyparis pine. There are plenty of nooks and crannies for sitting down with a good book or just sniffing the flowers.

But you can also keep exploring. Turn a corner and walk toward the sandcherry, whose purple leaves contribute three-season color to the garden. If it's May, the branches bear pink fragrant flowers. Search for the earthenware urns arrayed like Greek ruins among the lush undergrowth. Come around the side of the house to the front yard, where fragrant purple and pink petunias rise from the cracks in the brick walk and a river of rounded stones along the property's edge recreates the feel of a dry ravine.

Surely, you ask, maintaining this refuge must take hours of work each day. Sandy's voice takes a wistful tone. "I would love to be able to have that time, but we just don't," she says, pointing out that her work

(winter)



**Jack Pine (*Pinus banksiana* 'Uncle Fogy')**



at the nursery peaks during the summer. "In the spring and the fall is when we both do our clean-up and that sort of thing, a little bit of pruning here and there." She grins. "But when you have a conifer garden, it's not like you have to do clean-up."

**Kathryn Kingsbury is a contributing writer to *Madison Magazine*.**