

TOMORROW

Compassionate strangers reassure bereaved parents they will survive their grief.

homeLife

Bringing out the beauty

A Greensboro landscaper has designed gardens around the globe

BY NINA PENCE
Staff Writer

Sally Pagliai didn't know the difference between a pansy and a petunia when she accepted her first gardening job as a struggling college student.

But with her trademark fiery enthusiasm, she revived the annuals and perennials that surrounded the quaint cottage of her employer, who used a wheelchair. She poured concrete and constructed a ramp to a thriving backyard garden. When she wheeled her new friend into his refurbished garden, his face lit with joy. And Pagliai was hooked.

That was more than 20 years ago. Since then, she has peppered the globe with her eclectic garden designs. From Singapore and Italy to Irving Park, Sally Pagliai has made a name for herself and her Greensboro-based design firm, Studio Pagliai, by thinking outside the flower box.

"*Genus loci* is a term we used to laugh about in college," Pagliai says. She defines the term as "what is beautiful and spectacular about the land." Pagliai has a knack for finding it. An arbor shadowing the noon sun, the curve of a stone wall following that of the ocean horizon, a fountain's trickling descent into a pool — all enhance Pagliai's designs.

"The thing about landscape architecture is that it's like sculpture, but with dynamic material because the medium is constantly changing," she says.

A native Californian, Pagliai began honing her talent at the University of California at Berkeley, earning a degree in landscape architecture from California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. A study abroad planted her in Italy, where she met her husband, Stefano. The couple lived briefly in California, where she worked with renowned landscape architect Peter Walker and the international firm Edaw.

She and her husband returned to Italy for two years. There she designed a garden for a



A fountain forms the centerpiece of a courtyard of a home on West Market Street.



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See Pagliai, Page D8

Sally Pagliai uses plants, sculptures, gates and fountains in gardens that blend European and American styles.



An elevated oval landing (left) and a brick wall covered by creeping ficus (right) decorate a Greensboro garden designed by Pagliai.



HOMELIFE

Pagliai

Continued from page D1

13th-century home in the Italian hills. They moved to Greensboro in 1993.

"Anyone who travels is a sponge," Pagliai says. Her work on American gardens reflects her study abroad, juxtaposing old European designs with new, creating uniquely American gardens. Pagliai says that Greensboro gardens are her greatest challenge: "We have a drought in this area, and it's serious." By opening her clients to new ideas, she says, she can create gardens that will better withstand the dry times.

While in Northern California, Pagliai studied xeriscaping, a landscaping approach that uses little water. In Greensboro, she says, that means reducing lawn areas. In planting creeping grasses and drought-tolerant turf, homeowners can reduce the need for water.

"If we lose rhododendrons and azaleas, don't replant those," she says. In the South, some might argue that a garden without rhododendrons and azaleas is no garden at all, but Pagliai disagrees.

"The hardest thing about working in the South is getting people to think out of the box,"



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Sally Pagliai says her hardest task is getting people to "think out of the box." Instead of traditional azaleas and rhododendrons, she encourages clients to use drought-tolerant plants such as hydrangeas, nandinas and cotoneasters.

she says. "We have to look at what is thriving now — drought-tolerant plants like hydrangeas, nandinas, cotoneaster."

Pagliai says that her best clients are those who are willing to accept these changes.

To become a Studio Pagliai client, potential garden owners must endure a strict screening process.

"I'm lucky if 50 percent of

the people who call me I end up working with," she says, "but 90 percent of my finished clients I have a very successful relationship with."

The process begins with Pagliai's initial visit to a site. "I try to remain neutral," she says, "and not say a thing."

She looks at every aspect of the potential client's home — their clothes, their lifestyle, their art, their favorite colors,

even their pets.

Then she begins the dance, flinging her arms in the air and gesturing as she attempts to convey her ideas of the finished product — a tall deciduous tree here, trellage there. When she sees a glint of approval in the eyes of the property owners, she's got a job.

At \$100 per hour, Pagliai does not come cheap, but she

precisely plans and executes her work. She draws each design in her 400-square-foot studio above her garage behind her Greensboro home. Then Pagliai calls on the contractors, iron workers, welders and masons that she says make her look good.

"I'm a real believer in the collaborative effort," she says.

The garden of Robert and Harriette Knox on West Market Street in Greensboro incorporates French, Italian and Southern influences. An intricate brick wall dripping with roses encloses the space, and Belgian-granite blocks surround a center fountain. The result: a traditional courtyard garden that coincides with the Charleston Revival architecture of the home.

The home of the Holl family in Lake Lure, in the mountains of western North Carolina, is less traditional, but Pagliai's design complements the property just as well.

When Pagliai first walked the land surrounding the newly constructed home, there were no trees and no plants. "We had to reclaim the hillside to bring it back to its natural wooded state," she said. By using such indigenous plant material as sourwoods, native dogwoods and mountain laurel, Pagliai created several garden spaces. Day lilies and an arbor add visual interest to the property and enhance the rolling

profile of the topography.

Her schedule keeps her jetting across the country, consulting here, designing there. She recently was invited with a New York colleague, Jack DeLashmet, to design a potager, or kitchen garden, at Villa Maria, a refurbished convent in the Hamptons, a collection of resort towns on Long Island. Their work was featured in the Hampton Designer Showcase Magazine. The potager garden also will appear in Traditional Homes magazine.

Pagliai says she would like to work more in Greensboro. With two children, 16 and 11, she and her family are rooted here.

She looks forward to creating more local gardens and working on her own Sunset Hills property. "My garden is really an infirmary," Pagliai says. It is littered with clients' unwanted plants that she nurses back to health.

Pagliai already has big plans for her own garden, but she says it will never be complete. "You can't really be a true gardener until you're 125 years old because gardening is about ripping up and starting over," Pagliai says. "I aspire to be a gardener."

Contact Nina Pence at 373-7020 or npence@news-record.com