

CHICAGO

HOME & GARDEN

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What's Now

A garden evolves, not just over the years, but in the course of one summer. One type of flower fades before another even opens up; the garden was mostly white a few weeks ago but now it is mostly pink and yellow. Like our growing children, our gardens never stay one way for very long.

And like class pictures of children, photos of our gardens are one-moment-in-time images that can't adequately convey the subjects' personalities. A photo might point out how clever you were to plant those vibrant orange daylilies where they could mingle with the bold purple bee balm, but it rarely seems able to speak of the way the garden feels, the sentiment that washes over a visitor to the space, the unique angles and views that exist here and nowhere else.

When Megan Williamson enters a garden, she is preternaturally attuned to all of those elements, and she then spends a few days attempting to capture them on canvas. A Chicago-grown landscape painter with years behind her spent painting the countryside in Italy, on Long Island and elsewhere, she has in more recent years turned her attention to smaller landscapes, private Chicago-area gardens that are singular expressions of one person's collaboration with plants.

"Whether I'm painting a hill town in Italy or a garden in Chicago,

I like to be able to see how man has affected the landscape and nature keeps pushing up through it—how they have kind of created each other." Her in-laws live in northern Wisconsin, surrounded by thousands of acres of genuinely wild nature in a national forest area, but that doesn't speak to her; she doesn't paint there. It's just nature, without the other half, humanity.

Megan would rather paint a garden, but don't think of her as an outright garden portraitist, someone who will come in and freeze-frame your garden in total realistic recall. Instead, she's an impressionistic portraitist, working directly from the real thing but turning out a painting whose lines and composition recall the garden rather than capturing it in a snapshot. "I'm not going to illustrate what the gardener did," she says. "I don't get into a position where they say, 'I want the gazebo in the center, and can you put the daffodils in, too?' The gardener and I meet together on the canvas."

While the gardener might think a particular tableau of flowers, shrubs and a pond would make an ideal picture, Megan reserves the choice of subjects for herself. "I'm not interested in the plants," she says. "I have a friend who tells me all the plant names, but I don't care. I care about the bigger architecture." In some ways, she is committed with

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