

## ARTIST'S VISION

A BEAUTIFUL BLEND Erin coordinates decorative furnishings to the colors of her plantings for color consistency.

# INSTANT COTTAGE GARDEN

Painter Erin Houghton's container garden blooms with English-cottage flowers and the colors of Provence.

BY DIANE SPEROS • PHOTOS BY MARK LOHMAN • STYLED BY SUNDAY HENDRICKSON



**ARTFUL ACCENT** An Adirondack chair gets a flourish with a planter filled with mini zinnias.

**A** visit to California artist Erin Houghton's garden is like taking a garden tour in the Cotswolds or the South of France—depending upon which of her outdoor rooms you're in at the moment. Erin's made the most of her space—a long, narrow side yard—by dividing it into a series of vignettes filled with pots of her favorite flowers, evergreen trees and flea market finds that she embellishes with her painter's hand. While she always says she learned to paint by framing images with her camera, Erin's garden is now her canvas, and her paintings reflect its beauty.

### DOWNSIZING WITH A TWIST

When Erin moved to her townhouse 14 years ago, she went from a large home with a generously sized yard to a smaller home with a long, narrow side

#### Close-Up

**Size of the garden:** 60 feet long x 14 feet wide

**Location:** Costa Mesa, California

**Zone:** USDA 9

**Type of garden:** Cottage garden divided into themed outdoor rooms

**Challenges:** 1. Very small space; 2. Garden is completely exposed to the sun in one part and is shaded in another

**Strategies:** Container plantings are mobile, allowing for diversity and creating the illusion of more space

**Key plantings:** Geraniums, impatiens and iceberg roses for their hardiness; high-growers like foxgloves and delphiniums planted in rear pots; ficus and silver leaf in pots with wheels vary the look; and pansies are also a mainstay.

**Owner's favorite part of the garden:** Depends on her mood and what she's painting

**Special care tip:** Deadheading is a must!

**Inspiration:** Picking roses as a child with her grandmother and visiting Monet's garden in Giverny, France



A PAINTER'S VIEW With her soft-coated Wheaten terrier, Bentley, at her side, Erin draws inspiration from her artful container garden.

yard. The garden consisted of three tall, skinny trees, grass and a brick patio. “The first thing I did was replace the grass with pea gravel and that became my first little room. I then made a circular flowerbed and lined it with river rocks,” she explains. After installing a new patio and learning which plants worked in the sunny and shady spots of her yard, Erin discovered how container plantings could transform her landscape.

## CONTAINING HER DISCOVERIES

“Grouping five or 10 containers together in half circles gave my straight little yard much more dimension, with curves and paths that I could position where I wanted them,” Erin says. With this discovery, that first cluster of pots has evolved into dozens of container plantings that create the illusion of height and depth beautifully.

“Now everything is potted—it’s just a matter of finding the right container for whatever I’m planting,” Erin explains. Evergreen trees such as ficus and silver leaf are in large containers with wheels. “The trees draw the eye upward, creating the height that balances everything else. And because the garden is a combination of full sun and shaded spots, mobility is a must.” Classic cottage blooms like delphiniums and foxgloves are placed in pots at the rear of various arrangements, acting as elegant backdrops.

## PICKING HER PALETTE

A photographer for many years and an admirer of French Impressionism, Erin was inspired by the photos she took of Monet’s garden in Giverny, France. “I wanted my garden to have that same lushness and diversity of colors and textures,” Erin enthuses, “and it still inspires me daily.”

Taking a cue from the master Impressionist, Erin’s one part of the garden is French in style, with white roses and crimson geraniums spilling out of containers. “The pots add instant color despite not having a lot of dirt to plant in,” Erin says.

The majority of the garden, though, is classic English-cottage style, with a white picket fence and white planters filled with blues, pinks, lavender, and roses. “I tend

## POTTING AN ENGLISH-COTTAGE GARDEN

Even on our side of the pond, you can have a proper English garden whatever your climate.

- Plant perennials. A traditional English garden color scheme most often pairs blue, lavender, purple, pink, and white hardy flowers that can withstand the elements well. Erin’s opted for impatiens, roses, delphiniums, and foxgloves in simple terracotta planters that she can mix and move around as needed.

- Light with white. Nothing lightens and brightens a garden the way white does. Whether it’s paired with red geraniums, as Erin has done, or a white planter adjacent to a weathered structure, white flowers and décor lend freshness that always looks right.

- Pick a signature hue. Whether you favor blue delphiniums, purple pansies, or pink roses, let your choice influence your garden’s décor. For instance, Erin recently found some great old white wicker furniture and plans to change the look of one section of her garden to a seaside cottage garden and work seashells into the look.

- Deadhead regularly no matter what! Most gardeners don’t like to deadhead their blooms, but Erin swears it’s what keeps her containers lush. “The flowers come back much stronger and even more beautiful than before,” she says.

CREATIVE COMPOSITION With its white birdhouse, wrought-iron dining set, statues, and improvised containers filled with pink and purple blooms, this secret haven is a real-life work of art.





**FASHIONED FOCAL POINTS** Erin is slowly introducing more red into her garden palette. Painted a warm brick hue, these shutters and picket fence are the perfect companions to a vintage bicycle repurposed as a planter and a wall-mounted planting of pink petunias.



**A LIVING VIGNETTE** Erin painted this castoff bench white. Now it's a display space for a blue toolbox-turned-planter, a church-like birdhouse, and one of her own original canvases.

## REPURPOSE AND RECYCLE

While another's trash may not necessarily become your treasure, it may be someone else's. Erin constantly changes the look of her garden by adding new flea market finds and giving away old things to new owners. Here are a few of her other decorating tips:

**Hand-painted signs add another dimension to your garden.** "I find mine at local craft shows for a few dollars. You can make your own by painting an old piece of weathered wood. Or do what I do—paint signs on canvas and hang them."

**Don't be afraid of leaving wood outdoors.** Depending on where you live, wooden furniture gains more character with age and makes great containers for plants. "I have an old wooden toolbox that's a darling planter," says Erin.

**Give things a second or even third look.** Ready to get rid of that old bicycle? Why not paint it a different color and either attach a planter to it or, if it has a basket, fill it with a new planting. "Sometimes a little imagination is all it takes," Erin says.

to be pretty traditional here," says Erin. "Cottage gardens tend to look spontaneous and unplanned, and that's the feeling I wanted to capture."

While you wouldn't know it from her cheerful Impressionist-style paintings and the whimsical flea market finds that decorate the garden, being bolder about color is Erin's new goal. "I change things around, but generally prefer harmony with my container plantings. But, last year I tried some red and yellow combinations and loved them! I recently painted a vintage bicycle planter red to add some punch." Pairing red and pink flowers is her next goal.

## DECORATIVE DETAILS

Hand-painted signs, vintage fabrics and throw pillows, castoff furniture and other assorted treasures fill this garden with whimsical charm. "Nearly everything comes from flea markets, tag sales, Goodwill, dollar stores, swaps with friends and family—anything old becomes new again once I get hold of it. A fresh coat of paint on a 99-cent pot is all it takes for a little sprucing up," Erin says.

"It's not what you don't have, it's what you do with what you have," she explains.

This is Erin's mantra, and her container garden is a perfect example of it. "The garden is a living thing," says Erin, "so I add new things every year as well as remove some things." Exchanging plants and objects with neighbors and visitors as well as appreciating the "volunteer" plants that sprout from seeds dropped by birds keep the garden changing from year to year. "These are gifts from nature," Erin explains. While most of us would lament having a smaller garden and less space to work with, Erin's creative container garden shows that size doesn't matter. "Containers have enabled me to have the appearance of a large, lush garden where one wasn't possible with in-ground plants."

**Editor's note:** You can follow Erin's past and future garden endeavors at [thepaintedgarden.blogspot.com](http://thepaintedgarden.blogspot.com)