

PRINCETON

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M A G A Z I N E



Head of the Class
Princeton University President
Christopher L. Eisgruber

EMBRACING OUTDOOR LIVING

MEET LOCAL LANDSCAPE AND GARDEN DESIGN EXPERTS

BY TAYLOR SMITH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFFREY E. TRYON

New Jersey is lucky enough to experience four distinct seasons that dramatically change the color, feel, and functionality of one's own backyard. The landscape architects, gardeners, and designers interviewed here are the perfect professionals to call upon when your goal is to enhance and better enjoy your outdoor living space. From incorporating wildlife and water features to elaborate hardscape designs and tree planting, these experts are all highly qualified to help your garden dreams become a reality. In addition, enhancing one's outdoor living areas not only improves the look of the home, it has also been shown to increase property value, making it a savvy financial investment.



RONNI HOCK, FOUNDER OF RONNI HOCK GARDEN & LANDSCAPE

When working with a particular client, where do you draw inspiration from?

I draw inspiration from their imagination as well as personality to create a collective vision. Our initial meeting is the key. I focus as much on their taste, background, and lifestyle as I do on the actual space. My questions tend to evolve around “Who are you and what do you really like?” Since I have a strong passion for creating unique and inspirational gardens as the focal point of each project, I seek to balance what color, texture, and variety of plant material *they* prefer with what I think works best. Regardless of the number of walls, pathways, water features, or outdoor structures I include in a design, I find the best balance of hardscaping and landscaping comes from a garden-centric approach.

Describe the stages of each project, from design to installation.

We have a very particular process that’s been developed over the past 18 years. My husband, Randy, believes that the initial call with a client is critical to setting the stage for a successful project. He spells out our entire approach — from the initial meeting to final installation as well as our availability and hypothetical timetable — to see if the prospective client is a “good fit” for RHG&L. They get a tsunami of information before we even meet. He even refers them to online resources like Houzz, Princeton Online or our website for additional insight. From our perspective — the more you know about us, the easier it is to make the best-informed decision. At the first meeting, we walk and talk the project, take photographs and give the prospective client a feel for who we are and, most importantly, who I am. In essence, I am the owner, Master Gardener, designer, and project manager. I’m involved with every phase of development from design to installation and the only person they will deal with! That means the chemistry has to be right for the client. Once I get a budgetary range at the first meeting, I take the appropriate time to do a series of rough sketches (to the client’s budgetary range, not mine) and schedule a second meeting. If the client’s impressed and seeks to engage our services, we take a retainer (applied to the overall cost) and I go to work on the actual design. This always involves a great deal of give and take with the client (as well as design revisions) but once the Master Design is complete and approved, we take a deposit and schedule the work. Randy tells our clients, “There are three absolutes in life — death, taxes, and construction delays. It’s our goal to eliminate the third. Once we start a project, we finish. The only real variables are the weather and supply chain issues.” I think our clientele appreciates our honesty and approach.

How did your interest in garden and landscape design begin?

My passion for Mother Nature goes back to my childhood in Ohio. I grew up a tomboy with a penchant for climbing trees, running through the fields, and rarely, if ever, coming home neat and clean. In the mid-’90s, we moved outside of Philadelphia — a few miles from Longwood Gardens. I was magically inspired by my first visit to Longwood and, after taking classes in design and horticulture, I spent several glorious years “playing” in my own garden. After moving to the Princeton area, I continued my education and became a Master Gardener. After a stint at Kales and a wonderful opportunity with one of the top designers in the region, I listened to the advice of my husband (and future business partner) and created Ronni Hock Garden & Landscape in 2004.

Name some of the awards and accolades that your business has received.

There’s no question that the Junior League of Princeton Showhouse & Gardens played an important role in the launch and development of our business. We were selected and featured in each event from 2006-2012. We were also fortunate to be included in an article in *Princeton Magazine* in 2008 that gave us a great deal of visibility. We’ve also been featured in articles in *Design NJ*, *NJ House & Home*, *Great Backyards*, and *Town Topics*. We have been “Best Of Houzz” for Design & Service 10 times over the past decade. We’ve been awarded “Best of NJ House & Home” seven times for design, landscaping, and hardscaping. In 2021, the readers of



PHOTO BY CHARLES R. PLOHN



Town Topics honored us with “Best Landscape Designer.” Personally, I’m most delighted with the feeling I get when a client gives me a great review or a strong recommendation to a friend.

What are some important factors for clients to consider when envisioning their ideal landscape and garden environment?

Find the right designer *for you*. Someone you can trust to create a space that captures what truly inspires *you*. Do your homework. Google. Scour Pinterest. Explore Houzz. Your suggestions will inspire the designer and shape the design. Take your time and remember — it doesn’t cost a fortune to find happiness.