

The GARDEN came first

Noted garden historian, author, lecturer, and scholar Judith Tankard started a garden—and a new career path. by Regina Cole | photographs by Kit Latham

ON A VISIT to the home of a garden writer and scholar, it is easy to assume that the beautifully designed, lushly blooming gardens surrounding her house are an outgrowth of her work. Surely the woman who “wrote the books” on Gertrude Jekyll and Ellen Biddle Shipman, the woman who lectures

on Arts and Crafts gardens at Radcliffe, the woman who received the Massachusetts Horticultural Society’s Gold Medal would go home and plant a garden.

But no—it happened the other way around. In 1976 Judith Tankard had a clothing business and a degree in architectural history when she and

her husband bought a 1920s house that had seen better days on a busy street in Newton, Massachusetts.

“It was covered with cement-asbestos siding,” she shudders. “In the packed dirt of the front yard, there was a concrete pathway to the street. Some grim old yew bushes were the only growing things.”



Iris siberica, *Amsonia tabernaemontana*, and *Dictamnus albus purpureus* (gas plant) dominate the June border. ABOVE: Judith Tankard, writer and practicing New England gardener.



FAR LEFT: Since building the fence that gave the garden structure, John Tankard has made the most of their simple Arts and Crafts house.
LEFT: *Baptisia australis* (false indigo) thrives.
BELOW: The shady "ginger steps" are planted with *Asarum europaeum* (wild ginger).



John Tankard is a Newton-based architect with a penchant for building things out of wood. (At one end of their living room is a large table with inlaid brass tailors' measurements along the edges, made for his wife in her clothing-design days. Today it is stacked with horticultural books and folios.) To launch the project, John built a fence. "We wanted a garden, so that came first."

The Arts and Crafts-style fence seems of a piece with the house and its contents, but Judith won't claim that much forethought. She does give herself and John credit, however, for establishing a beachhead for beauty in a yard where even the yew roots were like cement.

"I grew things—vegetables, annuals, a few perennials—but it was never really very successful," Judith goes on. "This was during


the 1980s; garden history was a new discipline. The garden designers I hired had trained at Radcliffe, which is how I was introduced to those seminars. I was burned out with my [former] work, but this brought together architecture, design, colors, textures—all the things I'd studied and enjoyed."

That's evident in the garden today. Intense colors, stately forms, and defined borders front the sunny street, while the more private back yard has lush greenery, shaded glades, and paths partially overrun with ground covers. A kitchen deck and the former garage open to the garden.

"They're hardy New England plants," this gardener says. "Iris, daylilies, hostas." Judith says success is due to double-digging all the borders. "Two high-school students worked all summer, going down three feet."

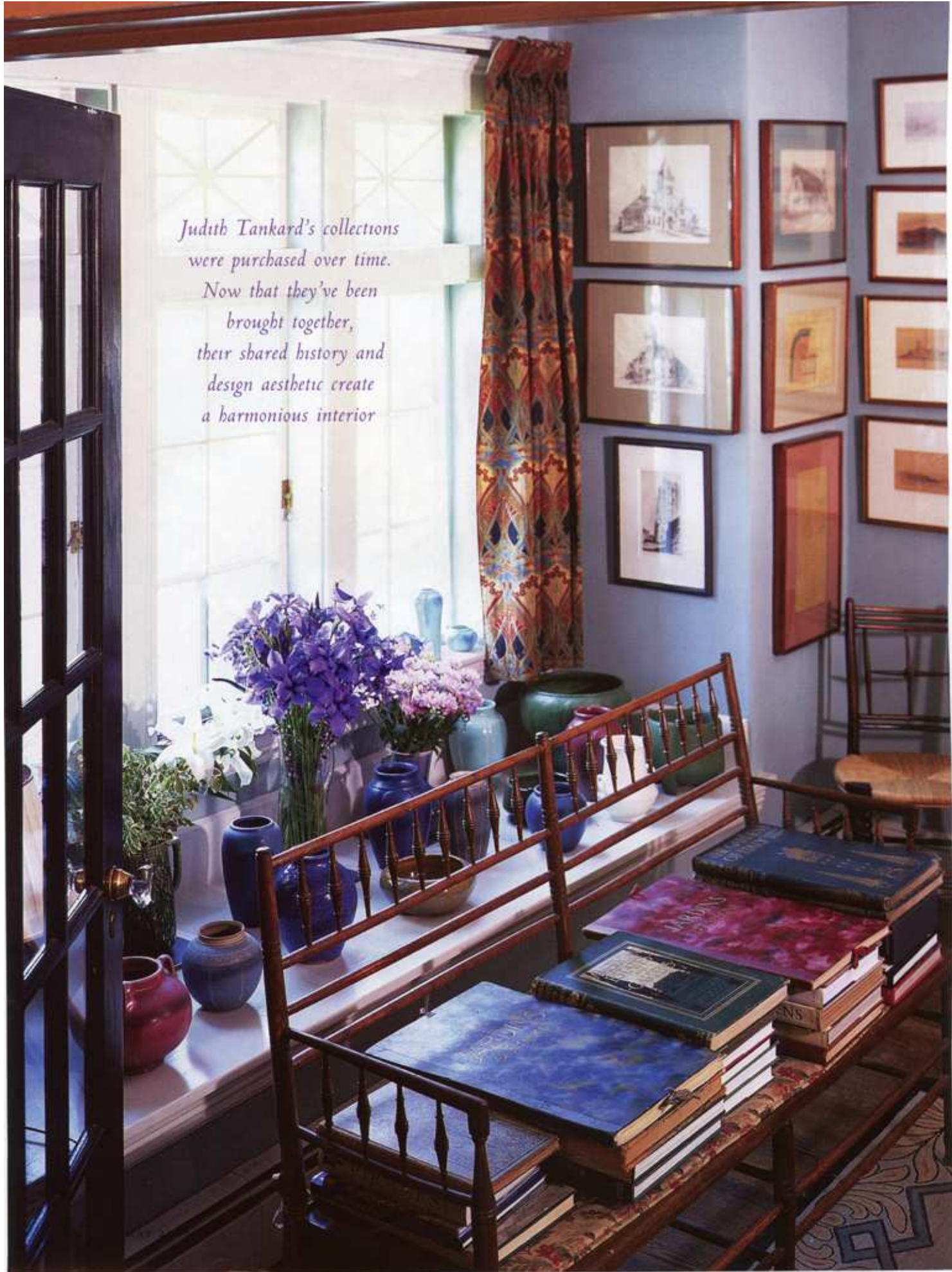


LEFT: Geranium "Johnson's Blue," herbs, and lettuces line a path. TOP: *Cornus kousa* (dogwood) blooms by John's office; *Rhododendron carolinianum* thrives in its shade. ABOVE: Siberian irises. BELOW: A gate inspired by Voysey.

A photograph of a garden border. A wooden fence runs along the right side. The garden is filled with various plants, including large green hostas, purple flowers, and a cluster of dark purple leaves with white flowers. The background shows more greenery and a house.

On one side of the house, the fence that first defined this garden is the foundation for a spring and herb border. Among the plants are hostas, hydrangeas, astilbe, annuals, herbs, and *Heuchera micrantha* "Palace Purple" (coral bells).

*Judith Tankard's collections
were purchased over time.
Now that they've been
brought together,
their shared history and
design aesthetic create
a harmonious interior*



RIGHT: The living room fireplace showcases Low tiles and a Voysey reproduction clock.

BELOW: A small Arts and Crafts washstand holds favorite pieces of pottery by a friend, Jarvie candlesticks reproduced by United Crafts, Rookwood pottery, and Voysey-designed tiles.



OPPOSITE: The Sussex bench is in the style of Morris; pottery is American and fabric is from Liberty. Architectural drawings are by Voysey and others. **ABOVE:** A library room is furnished with a Voysey table and chair reproduced by Trustworth Studios.

ROOMS *by a garden maven*

THE TANKARD HOUSE is filled with original and reproduction English Arts and Crafts furniture, pottery, American quilts, early 20th-century English fabrics, and ceramic tiles of the period. The walls are lined with architectural and botanical prints. Judith also has a library of about 5,000 volumes of garden history books. The collection of horticultural books and folios is dominant throughout the house; several upstairs rooms are given over to bookshelves, library tables, desks, and office equipment. Beautifully bound

and illustrated books also rest on downstairs tables, benches, and window seats. References to Judith Tankard's role models are both subtle and bold: an archival photo of Gertrude Jekyll is tucked into a bookshelf corner, reproduction Voysey pieces furnish a library room, Sussex chairs and Liberty of London fabrics furnish the living and dining rooms.

As a garden historian, Judith often travels to Europe—but that's not how she found the washstand (now a dining-room server). "It was the first piece of English Arts and

Crafts we ever bought," she says. "We found it at Brimfield in western Massachusetts in 1972. It had a marble top that we use in the kitchen for rolling out dough."

The small oak piece holds pottery, tiles, and candlesticks, favorites old and new. It might be seen as a metaphor for Judith Tankard's career. The pieces weren't collected at one time, methodically and with deliberate intent. But now that they have all been brought together here, we see that they share history and a design aesthetic, for a pleasing effect. ✦