

ERIN WESTON

The New Face of Gardening

BY **AMBER NIMOCKS**



Photo by Sallie Hedrick

Erin's contagious smile helps convey her passion for gardening, bringing the joy of digging in the dirt to a new generation.

In 2002, Erin Weston was close to landing her dream job as a television producer for Martha Stewart Living. It was the perfect opportunity to put her media savvy, her art history degree from UNC-Chapel Hill and her inherited green thumb to work all at once.

The interview process was going well, and Weston was feeling confident. Then she heard the news: The company's iconic CEO had been accused of securities fraud. The ensuing media frenzy and legal entanglements led the company to freeze the position Weston had been gunning for. Stuck in a boring job in New York, she decided to come back home to North Carolina for a while and regroup.

Almost eight years later, life is flourishing for Weston in Garner, N.C. A garden of her own design and doing is thriving on the three acres that surround her home, and she is building a seasonal décor and botanical design business by turning clippings from her plants into fabulous arrangements.

The daughter of Noel and Molly Weston, owners of Lakeview Daylily Farm and well-known gardeners in the Triangle area of North Carolina, Erin is also hoping to give turning the earth a hip, new image. She has done design work for "Extreme Home Makeover," and in the fall she completed production of a pilot for a television series called "Rock Star Gardening."

The show turns the tables on

standard gardening shows with wacky characters like gardening fairies and stunts such as using motorcycles to pull up overgrown acubas and make room for more non-traditional greenery. With her cute blonde bob and lilting Southern accent, Weston is an on-camera personality and a behind-the-scenes creative force. She hopes to find a distributor for the show this year.

"I guess I want to make soil sexy and just appeal to folks who wouldn't otherwise care about gardening," Weston said.

Her own love affair with gardening began in earnest when she moved to the Garner home she inherited from her uncle. Her grandfather built the house in the 1950s, the first of the subdivision he developed. It had been her grandparents' home when she was growing up, but in recent years, the house and grounds had been neglected.

"When I first moved in, it was just scrappy," Weston recalled.



This wreath from the "Make Mine a Green Valentine," is one of Weston's original creations.



Photos by Erin Weston

Weston enjoys planting masses of the same plant for effect, as in this circle of *Rhodea japonica* beside the walkway.

***Nandina domestica* and *Rhodea japonica* thrive under this mature *Cedrus deodara*.**

Knowing that she needed to get the property in shape sooner or later, she moved in, intending to stay for a couple of months.

“My thought was that I wasn’t going to be down here that long, but spring is a very seductive season in North Carolina,” Weston said.

She began growing heirloom vegetables and herbs and selling them to area chefs who use local produce. “I wanted to make sure everything paid for itself as it went along,” she said.

And then she decided to tackle the yard. Growing up, Weston had always been around plants. Her father worked as a horticulturalist for the city of Raleigh for 30 years before starting the daylily farm. But revamping a lapsed landscape wasn’t anything Weston had experience with.

“I really didn’t learn until I started growing things myself,” Weston said. “I don’t think anyone learns until they get their hands dirty.”

The flowerbeds surrounding the house, which are now thick with perennials and head-high shrubs, were empty. But the garden had some things going for it. Decades ago, Weston’s father and grandfather had planted large trees that had since matured. By the lake that borders the property, a group of *Metasequoias* (a conifer also known as dawn redwoods) soar more than 100 feet in the air. Their full, fluffy fir branches provide a focal point that gives the large space a visual boundary. Surrounding loblolly pines fill in the border.

“These larger trees definitely serve as a driving force,” Weston said.

Rather than trying to create a plan

for the whole space, she concentrated on 500 square feet at a time. She used the trees around the property as pivot points for her designs. In the shade, she planted rows of hostas and *Rhodea japonica*, a tough, drought-resistant, evergreen perennial that grows where nothing else does.

“I really love to plant the same thing over and over so you get a visual sweep,” Weston says.

In the dormant beds, she laid a base of rotted leaves 2 feet deep, which she topped with a 4-inch layer of wood chips. That gave her plants a fresh place to start.

“The dirt is what makes the garden,” Weston said. “If you put time into preparing soil, you’re going to have a great garden in five years.”

Another inherited advantage of the property is the turf surrounding the beds — thick, slow-growing emerald zoysia. But not everything that came with the land was an asset. On a slope behind the house, a thick stand of bamboo had taken hold. Rather than fight it, Weston decided to work with it. She laid a pea gravel path and created an alcove within the bamboo, adorned with Asian-inspired stone figures.


“We didn’t contain it,” Weston said. “We gave it a certain amount of space and it took over.”

Ornamental edibles such as figs, grapes, blueberries and apple trees grow throughout the property, as well as traditional Southern favorites of magnolia, holly and nandinas. Clippings from these evergreens go into the wreaths and decorations Weston creates. Her work has become popular for wedding arrangements, and she sells them as well at the Weston Farms stand at the State Farmers Market in Raleigh. Weston’s creations are made from materials grown on the property, making good use of clippings she collects after pruning her bushes.

Along the way, Weston has enlisted lots of help. Her friends, from nearby

and as far away as Europe, often come to visit, and when they do they get their hands dirty. She once hosted a nightclub owner visiting from Berlin who was thrilled with his chance to run a tiller.

“Farming is endlessly fascinating to city folk,” Weston said.

Whether she does it by putting friends to work in her yard or through a television show, Weston clearly has a future in winning hearts and hands for the future of gardening. 

Amber Nimocks is a better writer than she is a gardener, though she works at both from her home in downtown Raleigh. She has served as the food editor at *The News & Observer* and is an associate editor at *Edible Piedmont* magazine. Her constant vow is to grow more tomatoes next summer.



Photo by Erin Weston

Even this small section of the garden is testament to Weston’s great eye for design. Here, *Baptisia australis*, *Camellia sasanqua* ‘Cleopatra’, *Sedum* ‘John Creech’ and *Loropetalum chinense* ‘Plum Delight’ intermingle to a great effect.

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