



urban pocket garden

A less-than-large garden in Manhattan
proves it's all about texture and foliage.

TEXT BY JAMES A. BAGGETT PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIRGINIA WEILER

Tucked behind an 1850 brownstone smack-dab in the middle of Manhattan, this 10×20-foot perennial garden boasts but one plant, a *Magnolia stellata*, in the actual terra firma. Everything else makes its home in a raised bed or container.



In one of the raised beds, *Aucuba japonica* 'Variegata' and *Hosta* 'Frances Williams' are underplanted with variegated Solomon's seal and *Helleborus* 'Heronwood Picotee'; the corner is anchored with an *Ilex crenata* 'Sky Pencil'. Pots of begonias, agaves, and *Dianella tasmanica* line the lattice-covered cement wall.



People often refer to my former garden in New York City as a pocket garden. Tucked behind an 1850 brownstone in the historic Chelsea neighborhood (founded by Clement Clarke Moore, author of *The Night Before Christmas*), it measures a modest 10×20 feet and is jam-packed with large-leaf and boldly variegated perennials that thrive in Manhattan's minimal canyon lighting. Keep in mind that every plant—except a lone lemon-scented star magnolia tree—makes its home here in either a container or a constructed raised bed.

Started some 10 years ago on top of what was essentially a neglected lot of concrete and rubble, the garden is architecturally divided into three distinct levels, creating an enclosed, tiered effect. The lowest level, actually ground level, is a narrow, mossy strip of earth—convenient for stashing tools and terra-cotta—just outside the basement door. From here, a wooden library ladder climbs 5 feet to reach the main level, most of which is composed of two raised beds that flank a central path leading to a rustic, homemade wooden arbor. The third and final tier is

Clockwise, from above, left: A vintage metal garden chair is nestled into a corner between *Hosta* 'Sum and Substance' and the deliciously fragrant *H. plantaginea*; a rusty red children's wagon makes a sculptural support for the twining vine of a neighbor's vigorous trumpet vine (*Campsis grandiflora*); tender houseplants—including angel-wing begonias and tender ornamental grasses—share space during the warmer months on top of the stone wall to the rear of the garden.



Pass-along plants, *above left*, including a glaucous succulent ghost plant (*Graptopetalum paraguayense*) from Francis Parker in Beaufort, North Carolina—are mixed and matched to create pleasing combinations at eye level. Three different potted agaves, *above right*, from Ryan Gainey in Atlanta, as well as caladiums, elephant's ears, germander, geraniums, amaryllis, clivia, angelwing begonias, and tender ornamental grasses, jockey for space along the back wall.

created by a 5-foot-tall wall of industrial cement block, topped with massive slabs of stone and inexpensively disguised behind a screen of wooden lattice.

The stone wall serves as a convenient year-round platform for an ever-changing assortment of prize container plants, including tender angelwing begonias, agaves, caladiums, elephant's ears, my treasured variegated clivia, and cast-iron plant (*Aspidistra elatior* 'Variegata'). All of this is enclosed on three sides by a living drapery of handsome vining foliage, a combination of trumpet vine (*Campsis grandiflora*), English ivy (*Hedera helix*), and Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*).

Easier Said Than Done

Nothing comes easily (or cheaply, for that matter) in the middle of a city of 8 million people—especially when it comes to making a garden. Every single pound of soil was transported from the nearest Home Depot in New Jersey in a weighted-down vintage 2-cylinder Citroën Deux Cheveux—and carried, bag by bag, through the main

hallway of the brownstone and into the backyard. Lumber, containers, and lattice were also purchased out of town and transported piece by piece into the city and into the too-small space.

The two raised beds were soon filled with an assortment of shade-loving perennials and hardworking plants with interesting foliage (*Polygonatum* 'Variegatum'), strong fragrance (*Convallaria majalis*), or more than one season of interest (*Sedum spectabile* 'Matrona').

Lucky for me, most of the plants were passed along from green-hearted friends and colleagues. Many of the plants found their way home from visits to other gardens, public and private, around the country. There's the merrybells (*Uvularia grandiflora*) from my best friends in Virginia, the Dutchman's breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*) from Winterthur in Delaware, and the *Hosta* 'Tokudama' from Van Wade in Ohio. There's also a hardy geranium (*Geranium sanguineum*) from Robin Parer, owner of Geraniaceae in California, and a yellow *Corydalis lutea* from Ruth Rogers Clausen, coauthor of *Perennials for American Gardens*. Both make me smile.



A weathered fence provides a natural backdrop for containers of variegated plants—including *Plectranthus* 'Outback', chicken gizzard plant (*Iresine herbstii*), and scented geraniums—that march up the steps. The bench was a Valentine's Day gift.

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is a snap because there’s
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—gardener James A. Baggett

Meadow rue

Meadow rue (*Thalictrum rochebruneum*), opposite, unveils fluffy blossoms of pink and yellow. Hardy maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*), below right, boasts elegant foliage in a shady border.

Everything in this garden has a story to tell. Much of the heavy wrought-iron fencing was painstakingly retrieved—with permission—from the old American Foundation for the Blind building in New York City during its renovation a few years back. I snagged as many pieces as were allowed in the trunk of a New York City taxicab. Because this building was where Helen Keller worked from 1924 until her death in 1968, I like to think that, perhaps, she used to run her hands along this same fencing.

A passel of pots

Surrounding the raised beds and squeezed into every nook and cranny are more than 50 containers of every shape and size filled with even more show-stopping plants: castor beans, a fig tree, and roses that bloom despite only four hours of direct sunlight a day. Many of the containers contain tropical houseplants like *Dracaena fragrans* that overwinter indoors. Others contain tender bulbs—cannas, dahlias, elephant’s ears, caladiums, calla and Peruvian lilies—that are brought into the basement for winter protection and brought back out each spring.

Besides regular waterings during the growing season, there’s really not a lot to keeping this Zone 6 garden looking its best. The raised beds are top-dressed each winter with a generous layer of compost, and in early spring, I amend the beds with an all-purpose fertilizer. Of course, there are too many plants crammed into this space. But maintaining it is a snap because there’s certainly no room for weeds.

For more on container gardens, visit:
www.bhg.com/sipcontainers.



Pump Up Your Pots

Being confined to a pot means perennials have a limited supply of nutrients. Here are some tips for keeping your containers looking top-notch:

- **CONSIDER THE POTTING MIX.** When potting up perennials, invest in a good potting mix and add an all-purpose timed-release pellet fertilizer for an extra boost.
- **WATER WISELY.** Once a week during the growing season, treat your potted plants to a long drink of water that’s been spiked with liquid fertilizer at quarter- or half-strength.
- **OVERWINTER WELL.** In cold climates (Zones 5 and colder), prepare potted plants for winter by watering them well and protecting them in an unheated garage before temperatures dip below freezing. Make sure they don’t dry out.
- **DON’T GET ATTACHED.** Tough perennials like hostas and mints can live for years in containers. Check root balls and decide if they need to be repotted. If plants struggle, recruit them into an appropriate spot in the garden.

Hardy maidenhair fern

