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JULY-SEPTEMBER 2024

Dancing diagonals

Converted warehouse home has become lasting legacy to its late owner

Functional to fantastic

Champaign interior designer helps couple transform primary bathroom into a bright work of art

Cultivation culmination

Champaign couple's backyard arboretum a lifelong labor of love

Pipe dreams

Hidden gem of a building at edge of downtown Champaign has a rich history



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Branch out or chill out



Are you ready for a change? Looking for inspiration? Or would you rather sit back, relax and enjoy the present moment?

Either way, we have you covered. In this issue, we had the opportunity to learn about some beautiful indoor and outdoor spaces, all touched by the inspiration of creative minds. Jan Erkert and her late husband, Bernt Lewy, were able to see their dream home in a dingy, abandoned warehouse. Mike and Susan Weber turned their backyard into an arboretum with a colorful and ever-evolving line up of ornamental trees and hostas. And Lindsay Boughton took a dated bathroom and turned it into a soothing oasis.

If you're in the mood to learn something new, we have that covered too, with an enlightening guest column about the differences between interior designers and interior decorators. I don't know about you, but those designations always confused me, so I thought we'd ask an expert. I hope it helps you as much as it did me.

So much is going on in this issue, from the history of a Champaign landmark to the meaning of some commonly used terms in the wine world, that I hope you find something that sticks with you. At the very least, I hope it gives you fodder for your next conversation over dinner or drinks.

As always, if you have suggestions of homes and gardens in Champaign and Vermilion counties that you think we should feature, we'd love to hear from you! Send us a message via social media or email me at camaillepetersen@gmail.com.

Enjoy these long, gorgeous days of summer and we'll see you again soon.

Cheers!

— Carolyn

P.S. Check us out on Instagram (@athomecentralillinois) and Facebook (@athomeincentralillinois magazine).



The interior of Jan Erkert's renovated former ice warehouse has lots of angles, as her late husband, Bernt Lewy, who did most of the work, loved diagonals — as seen with the mirror in the primary bathroom.

Photo by Robin Scholz



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Lindsay Boughton Design transformed Jason and Linda Hobson's functional primary bathroom into one they'd always dreamed of.

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On our cover

A table made by her late husband, Bernt Lewy, is shown in the great room at Jan Erkert's converted warehouse home in Champaign.

Photo by Robin Scholz

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Sense of RELIEF

Interior designer **Lindsay Boughton** helped **Jason and Linda Hobson** completely transform and rearrange a bathroom that was functional but highly inconvenient

Story **Samaira Sandil**
Photos **Shannon Leigh Anderson**

CHAMPAIGN

The transformation of an early-2000s builder-grade bathroom to a modern classic seems magical. But as anyone who has done a bathroom remodel can attest, there is nothing magical about the process. It requires knowledge of design, construction expertise, and of course, a willingness to spend a substantial amount of money if it involves moving plumbing or buying new fixtures.

What goes into remodeling a bathroom? There are a lot of considerations: Such renovations are costly — averaging between \$25,000 and \$50,000 based on the size, says Lindsay Boughton of Lindsay Boughton Design. There is also the months-long timeline of planning and execution.

Linda Hobson and her late husband, Jason, completed an overhaul of their bathroom in May 2022, and it took three months to design and four months to construct due to the drastic change in layout.



The transformation of this bathroom included relocating most of fixtures and installing two vanities on either side of a new, smaller tub.

Provided by Shannon Leigh Anderson Photography





The shower was swapped with the toilet and rebuilt larger and in a more elegant style, with white subway tiles and a couple of niches for shampoo and body wash and shaving convenience.

Provided by Shannon Leigh Anderson Photography



But the efficient and stylish bathroom they ended up with was worth the cost and wait to them.

The original room's features were inconvenient: The floors were cold, the shower was small, the tub was absurdly large, the closets were oddly shaped and the toilet was too far from the bedroom. Being the primary bathroom, it was a large space and had a lot of wasted potential.

"Everything worked and was clean, so it was definitely not

a 'need,'" Linda says, but there were enough reasons to call for a redo.

They hired Lindsay to bring to life the bathroom they envisioned. She had no issues finding artistic inspiration. She had worked with the Hobsons before and was well acquainted with Linda's taste. However, the layout half of the puzzle was tricky; she had to shift and rebuild the major features for the efficiency aspect that Linda wanted.

Where once there had been a vanity with attached

cabinets, there are now two single vanities with a free-standing tub between; new cabinets were installed across from the vanities; a walk-in closet was built in the space formerly occupied by the oversized tub; and the shower and toilet switched locations.

The outdated tiles were replaced with a heated floor, one of Linda's "must-haves." The shower was rebuilt to be larger and more elegant with white subway tiles and nifty niches — one for shampoos and other supplies, and a lower "toe niche" for shaving convenience.



The color scheme was updated to a peacock blue for the new vanities, along with white walls and gold for the fixtures, lamps and hardware.
Provided by Shannon Leigh Anderson Photography



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The Hobsons were also happy to have a more classy, freestanding tub replace the old one. Lindsay got rid of the closets that were nestled between the old vanity and designed an upgraded cabinet and drawer combo across the room with much better storage space.

The improvements didn't end there. Another downside to the original bathroom was its dull and dated appearance, so Lindsay helped the Hobsons choose attractive colors to revitalize the space.

The peacock, white and gold colors tie the look together perfectly. The deep peacock in the vanity cabinets stands out from the base white tiling and is unified by the large art canvas placed between them. The gold gleams on the sink and tub faucets, shower fixtures, and closet handlebars, as well as accents the light fixtures and mirrors. With a few potted plants, surprises of green also dot the bathroom.

Certainly, the colors wouldn't shine without proper lighting. The Hobsons added a set of fashionable light fixtures to flank both vanities and hung a spherical chandelier directly above the tub. Not unnoticed is

The details

- **Interior Design:** Lindsay Boughton, Lindsay Boughton Design.
- **Construction and Installation:** Messmore Construction.
- **Tile Installation:** Bedolla Construction.
- **Tile Supplier:** Flooring Surfaces.
- **Lighting Supplier:** Springfield Electric.
- **Custom Vanities:** Plum Grove Millworks.
- **Shower Glass:** Bacon & Van Buskirk Glass.

the small window built into the shower to provide natural sunlight and warmth.

Lindsay worked her magic, giving the Hobsons a bathroom that was as delightful as it was functional. For those considering a renovation, her advice is to start planning early and find a team you can trust.

While Linda has since moved away, she really appreciated how Lindsay worked with her to create a space she loved.

"(It) feels like me," Linda says.

Mission accomplished.



Quite the PIPELINE

Long before it was home to Buzard Pipe Organ Builders and The Organ Loft Apartments, this downtown Champaign gem spent a half-century as the place to live for single working women



The second-floor hallway is lined with pipes for a current job at the Buzard Pipe Organ Builders building at 112 W. Hill St. in downtown Champaign.

Story Carolyn Maille-Petersen



Photos Robin Scholz

CHAMPAIGN

Tucked away on the northwestern edge of downtown Champaign lies a four-story brick-and-stone beauty with a fascinating history. Currently home to Buzard Pipe Organ Builders and The Organ Loft Apartments, the building at 112 W. Hill St. was originally constructed in 1897 as an annex to the now demolished Beardsley Hotel.

It became the home of the Women's Town Club in 1917 thanks to the largesse of U.S. Rep. William B. McKinley, who bought, renovated and furnished the building specifically for the organization. McKinley, a native Illinoisan, was known for his philanthropic nature. His niece, who was president of the Women's Town Club at the time, is credited with suggesting that he finance the purchase of the building.

For more than 50 years, it served as a boarding house for single working women. In the 1980s, after the club shuttered, the building was vacant before briefly housing a teen nightclub. Then it caught the eye of John-Paul Buzard, who was looking to expand his fledgling pipe-organ-building business. He bought the property in 1989 and it has been under his ownership ever since.



ABOVE: The Buzard Pipe Organ Builders building at 112 W. Hill St. in downtown Champaign is shown in the early 1980s, when it still had a roof over the front patio. **BELOW:** The 1902 Otis Dual Speed elevator still has the original car, scissor gate and hoistway.



One of the renovated third-floor apartments.

John-Paul has an affinity for historic buildings and antique items, and was determined to do what he could to maintain the property. There was a furniture store on the main level at the time of purchase, he says, while the other three floors were used for storage. He recalls the building being “really run down” with upstairs windows boarded up and an elevator that didn’t run very well.

“I thought, ‘Oh, lord, what’ve I got to do here?’” he says. There were pigeon and squirrel nests on the upper floors and water damage to the roof, among other issues. “It was just like a sponge.”

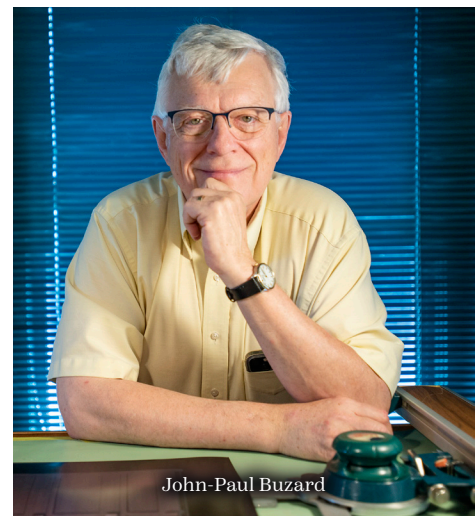
Despite all the problems, he still wanted the building. He bargained with the owner, eventually buying it for \$150,000.

“To get a place like this — 20,000 square feet — for that little money, allowed me to make the kind of improvements that we needed to,” he says.

He stabilized the floors, fixed the roof, had the elevator serviced, installed energy-efficient glass in the windows and generally cleaned up the building. Then he went about the business of making custom pipe organs for churches around the country.

A room of one’s own

John-Paul knows a lot about the building’s history, which was part of the charm for him. The main floor, he says, originally housed A.E. Wuesteman Jewelers on one side of the main hallway and the office of the house mother on the other. A communal parlor and dining room plus a kitchen filled out the



John-Paul Buzard

rest of the main floor, with bedrooms on the second, third and fourth floors.

According to John-Paul, the second floor had an apartment suite at the front end where the house mother lived, which included its own bedroom, bathroom and sitting room. That is now John-Paul’s office, with beautiful arched Romanesque windows overlooking Hill Street. The rest of the second floor consisted of bedrooms with semi-private bathrooms shared by two renters, as well as one communal bathroom — still in use today — in the hallway.

The third floor, he says, was all bedrooms and one communal bathroom. The fourth floor, which was added in 1902, had bedrooms with private bathrooms.

There were no kitchens in any of these rooms and food preparation was not allowed, according to documents from the Champaign County Historical Archives.



The former first-floor dining-hall space at what was the Women's Town Club has been converted into a the wood shop at Buzard Pipe Organ Builders.



Renters could either pay a weekly fee to eat in the main floor dining room or dine out.

Architecturally, it was built in the Richardsonian Romanesque Revival style, according to the Preservation and Conservation Association. This style is known for its natural stone-and-brick façades, semicircular arched windows and entryways, and decorative corbel tables along the roofline, among other characteristics.

The city designated the building as a landmark in 1998 because of its architectural and historical significance. The only changes John-Paul made to the façade were to remove the metal fire-escape ladder that ran down the front of the building — internal fire-safety improvements made it unnecessary — and the patio roof that spanned the front of the structure, which was deteriorating and wasn't original, he says.

"You could not see the really nice Richardsonian arched windows on the first floor," he says. "That rhythm was completely broken up by it."

Accommodating a growing business

Not surprisingly, John-Paul had to make changes to the inside of the building to accommodate his business, but he has done his best to preserve as many original features as he could. Some that remain are the wood and tile floors, original wall sconces and decorative handrails in the stairwell, as well as the 1902 Otis Dual Speed elevator, which is still used on a daily basis. Riding the elevator is like stepping into a time machine with its manual "scissor gate" that riders must close before the elevator will move.

"It's the same car (and) the same hoistway as in 1902," says John-Paul, but the motor, cables and brakes are all new.

Changes included reconfiguring a portion of the main floor to accommodate the wood shop and creating a three-story "erecting room" at the back where they can set up pipe organs under construction. The second floor was also opened up to make room for the tonal and console departments, where they make and "voice" the organ pipes and the cabinets that house keyboards and pedalboards.

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LEFT: The back of the Buzard Pipe Organ Builders workshop includes a three-story space where the large pipe organs can be assembled. RIGHT: The original wood-and-tile flooring is still in place.



As the business grew, they needed even more room, and in 2004, they built a two-story addition to the west side of the building that included a mill and dock. It was also around that time that they decided to return the third and fourth floors to their original use as apartments.

They converted the top two floors into six apartments, including a two-story unit with a spiral staircase leading to the fourth floor.

Each two-bedroom apartment is unique, with all but one retaining their original pine flooring, window sashes and mullions, while other amenities are new and modern.

For more than 30 years, John-Paul has been the proud caretaker and keeper of the history of the Women's Town Club building, in addition to being a successful business owner.

"We build instruments that use technology from the 1600s in addition to modern technology," he says. "The building really speaks to what we do and who we are."

Now, though, he is considering passing the baton to a new owner if he can find someone who will appreciate the space the way he has over the decades. Alternatively, he may redevelop the space. Only time will tell. *JP*

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A different **ANGLE**



*Jan Erkert and late husband **Bernt Lewy** turned a dilapidated former ice storehouse into an unconventional downtown oasis*





The addition on the back of the property includes a bedroom, bathroom and sauna that open out via sliding glass doors to a large patio with a hot tub and bistro table and chairs.

Story Carolyn Maille-Petersen



Photos Robin Scholz

CHAMPAIGN

Gazing out the windows of Jan Erkert's lovely, unconventional home, it's hard to believe that it was once a tumble-down warehouse surrounded by a dirt lot. And yet, it was. Now it's an urban oasis thanks to the vision of one artistic couple.

Jan and her late husband, Bernt Lewy, created a tranquil and elegant retreat from the bones of what had once been a storehouse for ice.

Built in 1905, their future home had seen better days when Jan first laid eyes on it in 2006. She had accepted the position as head of the Department of Dance at the University of Illinois, and they needed to find a place to live. The unexpected job offer and accompanying move brought with it heightened expectations for what they wanted in a new home since they had just finished building what she called their "dream home" in the Indiana Dunes.

Nothing they had seen around town piqued their interest, so it was pure serendipity when they came across the old ice warehouse and the owner happened to be on site. Jan made Bernt stop the car so she could talk to the man, and after a

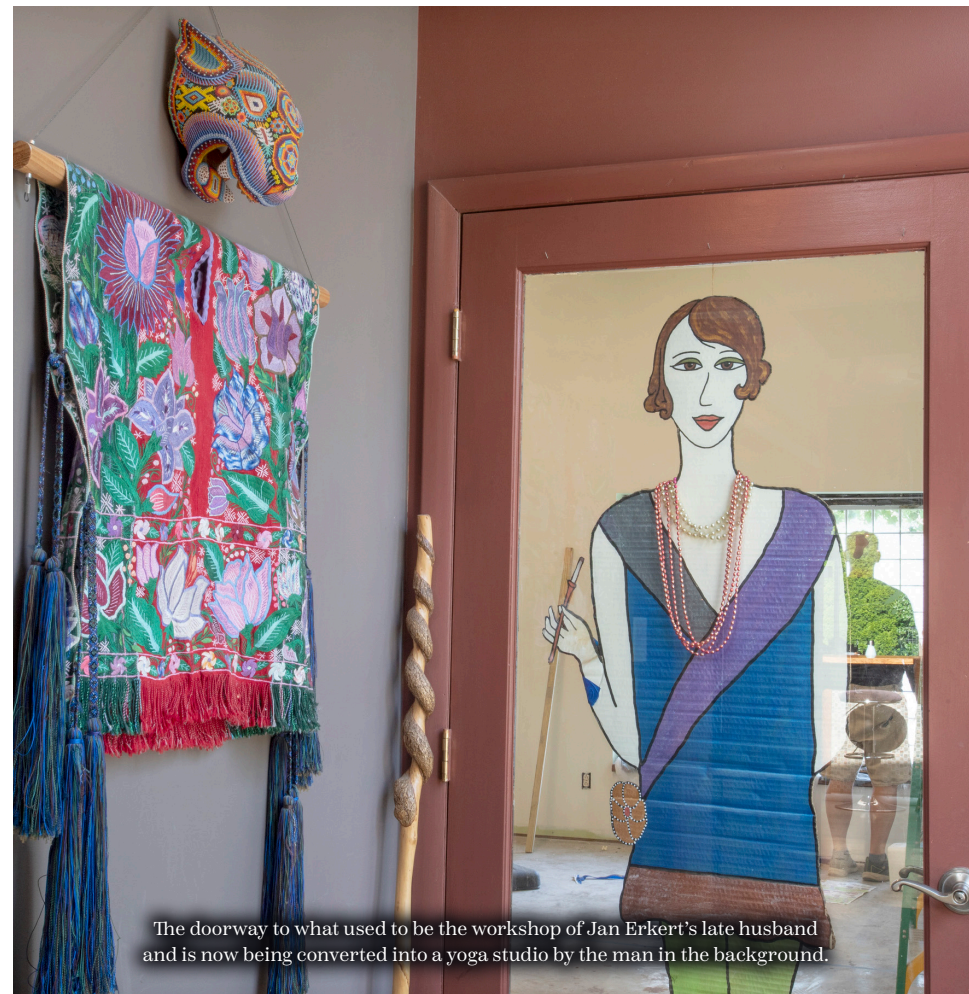
conversation with him about the property, she offered to buy it as-is. Bernt, seeing the possibilities, wasted no time embracing Jan's enthusiasm for the building.

A metamorphosis

The transformation from a dark, windowless, trash-filled warehouse to an industrial modern home filled with light, art and bespoke furniture was dramatic, as was the metamorphosis of the land around it.

The couple did nearly all the work themselves, thanks to Bernt's background in architecture, design and woodworking, and Jan's eye for interior decorating.

"We basically just took the bricks, and you know, got rid of everything" else, Jan says. "And then there were no windows, so we cut the windows. I mean, it was like building a new house, essentially."



The doorway to what used to be the workshop of Jan Erkert's late husband and is now being converted into a yoga studio by the man in the background.



A piano sits in the area where the addition meets the original brick walls of the building.

Part of what attracted them to the space, Jan says, was that Bernt could have his woodworking studio on site, which was of particular importance since he planned to handcraft all the doors, as well as the kitchen bar top, the dining-room and living-room tables, and the bathroom cabinets, among other things.

Bernt drew up the plans for their new home, including the addition that was put on the back of the building. He handed off the plans to the construction crew to do the physical work of transforming the site.

The original building is now the living- and dining-room space and a study, along with a “pod” built near one end to house a bathroom and storage. The pod also serves as a divider between the living area and Bernt’s former workshop, which is now being converted into a yoga studio for Jan.

Jan wanted to save the brickwork inside the warehouse, but that proved to be impossible due to building codes.

“When we first designed it, we wanted it

to all be brick,” Jan says. “But the codes are such that any outside wall has to have insulation and drywall.”

So they contented themselves with keeping the brick exterior as well as the interior pillars that hold up the exposed steel beams.

While Bernt was in charge of the design of the home, Jan was in charge of selecting colors and tiles, she says. She wanted to pull the color out of the bricks, so she settled on a shade of gray and set about painting the walls. It took many coats, she says, before she found just the right hue.

She also chose the kitchen cabinetry, which she found online. The cabinets were the display model at a showroom in Detroit and were on sale for a fraction of the original cost. This, she says, is a great way to save money on what is normally an expensive budget item. But, she says, it works best in a new build rather than trying to fit them into a pre-existing floor plan. After they were installed, they had concrete countertops made by Douglas Kistler of Uptown Concrete Design in Urbana.

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The existing floor was a wreck, Jan says, so it was overhauled as well. They decided to install a hydronic, or water-based, radiant-heat floor. This involved laying down tubing for heated water to flow through, then pouring concrete over it.

“The radiant heat is incredible,” Jan says. “There’s no sound. It basically rises 6 feet or so above the ground and then is met by cooler air. You’re only heating the place where humans are, essentially, so it’s incredibly cost effective.”

Between the heated floors and the wood-burning fireplace, she rarely needs to turn on the furnace, except on bitterly cold days.

Although the kitchen cabinetry and the building itself are all built at right angles, little else in the house is.

“Bernt loved diagonals, and if you look at the house, everything ... looks like it’s 90 degrees, but it’s slightly on an angle,” Jan says. “And I thought it was really brilliant because the house is such a rectangle.”

The diagonals extend to the furniture as well, she says.

“The bar is on an angle, the (dining) table’s on an angle, and it gives a dynamic to the space,” she says.

Even in their bedroom and bathroom, which are all one space divided by a double vanity, you’ll find diagonals, with the ceiling beam running at a different angle from the bathroom cabinetry and the mirror suspended above the vanity.

Their bedroom, bathroom and sauna are all located in the addition, which they built to feel like an extension of the garden, Jan says. Sliding glass doors at the foot of the bed lead onto a secluded patio with a bistro table and chairs, while another glass door in the adjacent shower opens onto the same patio but closer to the hot tub.

Melding the indoor and outdoor spaces was important to Bernt when he was designing their home, Jan says, so there are a lot of windows and doors throughout the house that give access to the yard.

From dead zone to oasis

Their yard, which was included in the 2013 and 2023 Champaign County Master Gardener Garden Walks, was nothing but a dead zone when they first bought the land, Jan says. They ended up bringing in heavy equipment and digging up more than 2 feet of earth and replacing it with top soil.

They planted over 100 trees and bushes a year after they moved in, as well as flowers and herbs. In the intervening years, their plantings have matured into a hidden



The open-plan primary suite includes a bedroom, vanity, mirror, bathroom and sauna.



LEFT: Jan Erkert’s late husband, Bernt Lewy, in his workshop with one of the many pieces he handcrafted. **ABOVE:** More of Lewy’s work, exemplifying his love of diagonals.

paradise on three sides of their home.

The garden is divided into “rooms,” Jan says, including a “green room” outside the two large sets of patio doors off their living and dining space. Nearly everything in that area is green or white. On the other side of the home, outside the former garage door turned kitchen window, is an herb garden surrounded by a walkway made of bricks salvaged from the warehouse renovation.

There is also a shaded area with a fire pit that saw a lot of use during the pandemic, and a gravel hardscape beyond the herb garden that includes a rock formation with water

bubbling out of a man-made boulder. This particular feature, made by Boulder Fountains out of Virginia, was a gift to Jan from Bernt on the occasion of her retirement.

“I can sit out here and it really helps me calm down,” she says.

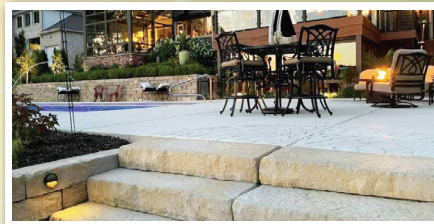
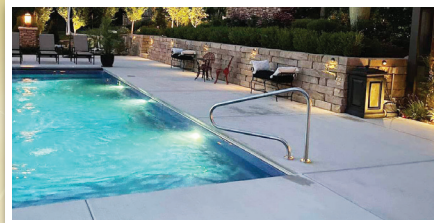
Bernt, who undertook the design and creation of their second dream home when he was 75 years old, spent more than 10 years completing what would become his final legacy. His handmade tables, bar top, doors and cabinetry are a physical testament to their shared vision and partnership.



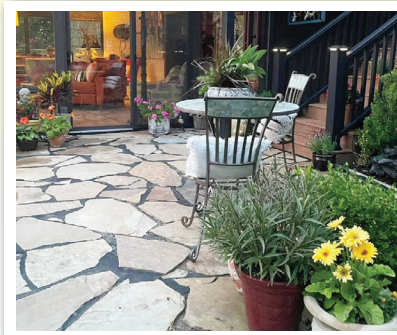
LEFT: Erkert and Lewy work to plant some of the 100 trees and shrubs they added in creating their back garden from what was a barren lot. **ABOVE:** The warehouse, built in 1905, was derelict when Erkert first laid eyes on it in 2006.

"After he died, I thought, 'I should think for a second whether I want to stay here or not,'" Jan recounts. "I sat with myself for about five minutes and went, 'Of course I'm going to stay here.' I don't want to move right now. I feel like I'm investing in this place."

"I'm just so amazed at the work he did," she says. "It's just a beautiful place to live." 



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From ROOT to STEM

In their almost four decades in Champaign, **Mike** and **Susan Weber** have nurtured an arboretum that has become their source of serenity



A view of Mike and Susan Weber's backyard arboretum in Champaign.

CHAMPAIGN

Mike and Susan Weber have grown and designed a magnificent arboretum in their backyard, creating a place where the 39-year Champaign residents retreat and find calmness.

Mike appreciates the serenity that tending the garden allows.

“Gardening takes you out of yourself,” he says. “It’s a process of giving.”

He mentions how nature carries on, perseveres and lacks an endpoint: When things in the garden die, Mike honors the opportunity for new life that is created, as a new plant will take the former’s place.

Mike notes how gardening is not prescriptive and there’s no cookbook for it, which allows it to be an adventure. He also appreciates the problem-solving it requires, explaining how days don’t generally go as planned because of the many unpredictable factors that play into it, making nurturing a garden a sort of mental exercise that keeps the brain healthy.

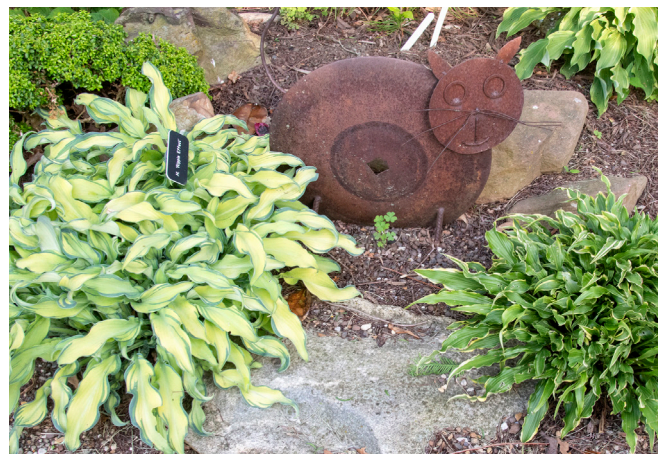
Mike contrasts the way he perceives engaging with nature and technology: “Screens are passive. Gardening is dynamic.”

It also requires discipline, he says — there are consequences of not responding to the ever-changing needs of a garden, which requires being present and invested.

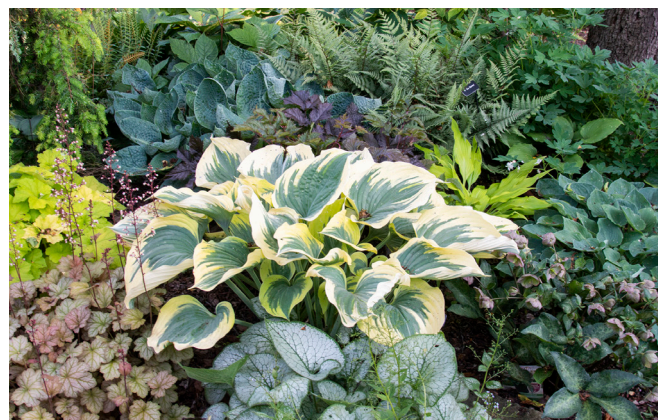
A long-standing fascination

Mike’s fascination with plants began in childhood. He grew up on a farm in the 1950s, prior to corporate agriculture. His first exposure was on an organic farm, where herbicides and insecticides were nonexistent. He learned to weed at a very young age, he says, and did that instead of livestock chores.

Mike says his first memory of horticulture was an experience when he was 4 years old: It was a bleak winter day and brilliant dandelions were blooming in the garden, so that morning, he picked some to give to his mother, and by noon, the dandelions closed up.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Mike Weber in his backyard arboretum in Champaign; stone fish in a dry pond; hosta ripple effect and a rusty cat; a liberty hosta is surrounded by heuchera, Brunnera, ferns and other shade lovers.





FROM LEFT: A glass bulb adds color; Variegated Solomon's Seal under a tree; A variety of evergreens.

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: A variety of colors and patterns on hosta; hosta sails ho; a large allium; prickly pear cactus in yellow and pink.



The brief pleasure and beauty of the flowers, along with the precious experience they allowed, captured a component of gardening that he holds dear: the social aspect and how collective experiences with flowers and plants create treasured memories.

Today, Mike and Susan's arboretum is home to 300 different varieties of woody ornamentals and conifers. Some of the conifers are native to Japan and China; one is a Japanese white pine. Their garden also contains a vanilla-twist weeping redbud, a sweet Susan magnolia, a southern magnolia, a witch hazel, a massive 30-year-old blue shag eastern white pine, a quirky bush's lace Engelmann spruce, an uncle foggy, an English hedge maple, a blue cloak white fir, a kousa dogwood, and several others. Also featured is a room of dwarf conifers, some of which are witches brooms.

In 1996, Mike became interested in hostas and today, the Webers' garden is filled with

many varieties: sea sapphire, which is blue-gray in appearance; sea lotus, which has upright leaves; midnight oil, which features leaves that are equally as shiny when wet or dry; yellow hosta, which has leaves that beautifully contrast the greens, blues and grays in the garden; striking red stem hostas, and many others.

One of the rooms in the garden is ornamented with a giant custom metal hosta leaf, adding tension and shine to the natural space.

Mike and Susan like to have a variety of both color and texture in their garden: In addition to the greens, grays and blues, they like to add in white and red plants. They are members of the national and regional hosta societies and appreciate that their memberships allow them to get together with people to work on actual things. In 2011, Susan designed the peaceful and picturesque hosta garden by



the University of Illinois Japan House.

The couple chose to design their arboretum in rooms, rather than creating a space completely visible from a single perspective. The room concept asks, "What's around the corner," which adds mystery, excitement and continuity when experiencing the outdoor space.

Susan, a knowledgeable, talented and diverse designer, claims no scientific gardening interests; her interests are in design. She adheres to the "Three Ts" when managing the aesthetic of their arboretum: triangle, tension and texture, and explains the importance of a space being balanced; creating tension, as that is what directs the eye; arranging horizontal and vertical triangles; ensuring mid-level structure; and regarding color as an endpoint.

Ultimately, however, Susan admits, "If you like it, that's all that counts."



Mike and Susan offer advice to the novice gardener: Start small, choose a couple of plants you're really attracted to, and do your research on how to care for them. While they acknowledge it may be tempting to cover the garden all at once, they suggest starting with one space. The novice gardener has to consider how far they want to go and how passionate they are about it, then select plants that require maintenance in alignment with what they're willing to do. Age and ability are also partial determinants.

They say new gardeners might consider starting with herbs, cherry tomatoes, hot peppers, small dwarf vegetables or a succulent garden. Another option is starting with houseplants, which are also important to research.

Mike and Susan suggest "The Well-Gardened Mind" by Sue Stuart-Smith for those looking for a related read. 

HEARD IT THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE

What to know about wine with ... Sun Singer's **Douglas Friedman**

Story and Photo
Carolyn Maille-Petersen

CHAMPAIGN

When it comes to the wine you like, “you do you,” as the saying goes.

That’s the message Douglas Friedman, beverage manager at Sun Singer Wine Bar and Café in Champaign, has for readers. Whether you like Prosecco or chardonnay, rosé or cabernet, under \$10 or over \$100, coastal or Midwestern wine, doesn’t matter. Wine is all about personal preference, he says, and no one should feel self-conscious about their drink of choice.

Douglas, who has been in the wine and spirits industry for more than four decades, estimates that he has probably tasted more than 10,000 wines. That adds up to a lot of experience and a lot of wine spit into a bucket.

If you’re a wine nerd — an oenophile, if you want to get technical — you know that there’s far too much to learn for one short article. But we’ll attempt to illuminate some interesting facts gleaned from our conversation.

When talking about wine, the word “tannin” is often bandied about. What does it mean and why is it important?

Tannins “are derived from the skin and the seeds and the stems” of the grape, Douglas says. They’re an acid that gives a wine longevity. “Tannins add complexity. They add richness over time.”

Different grapes have different tannins, and depending on the varietal and the amount of time a wine has been aged, you’ll taste the tannins at a different point on your palate (the top of your tongue). For example, cabernets contain back-palate tannins, Douglas says,



which give them a “puckery finish” because it’s the last thing you taste before you swallow. Pinots and merlots, by contrast, contain mid-palate tannins.

“Even though they have the same kind of fruit structure (as cabernets), those beautiful fruits (in pinots and merlots) kind of mask those tannins, so you don’t taste them as much,” he says.

But tannins are only part of the flavor equation. Another part is the climate in which a grape is grown. Cabernets, for example, are grown in multiple places around the world, but climate differences make for different flavor profiles.

Warm-weather cabernets are “big, fruity monsters,” Douglas says. You can leave the grapes on the vine longer, so you don’t have as much tannin. They’re found in places like Lodi and Paso Robles, Calif., which tend to be warmer because they’re further inland than other wine regions like Napa Valley. Cabernets grown in Napa Valley have a different profile because they are grown in a cooler climate, closer to the coastline. At some point this will change, Douglas says, because the climate is warming.

“A lot of Americans ... like the California wines, because they’ve always been a little bigger, a little juicier, a little jammier, a little more fruit-forward,” Douglas observes.

But be careful not to equate “fruity” with the terms “sweet” or “dry.” When someone talks about the fruitiness of a wine, they’re literally talking about the prominence of the fruit flavor in it.

“What you’re really doing is you’re tasting the grape there,” Douglas says. As such, a fruity wine isn’t necessarily going to taste sweet.

In the wine world, sweet is used to describe a wine with more residual sugar than a dry wine. And though a dry wine has less residual sugar than a sweet one, it may still taste “sweet.”

In the end, you don’t need to know anything about wine other than what you like. If you have questions or want to try something new, that’s where someone like Douglas is helpful. When you’re ready to venture outside your comfort zone, ask the in-house expert at your preferred wine shop.

“We’ve been doing this for years,” says Douglas of himself and other local wine experts. “Our advantage is that we probably have a lot more experience than most people do.”

Want to try something similar that’s in the same price point? That’s where Douglas comes in. Whether your favorite wine is Barefoot or Silver Oak or something in between, a wine expert can help you narrow down the choices.

“We’ll find something a little different, not much more expensive,” he says.

If you go to the store and make a guess at picking out a wine that’s similar to what you’ve been drinking, you may end up wasting your money on something you don’t like.

“It’s very possible that what you’re trying is not really going to fit. It’s going to be too big a jump for you,” he says. “That’s what a lot of people do. They take huge jumps from A to B and say, ‘Oh, I don’t like this.’”

It’s better to take small steps so that the contrast in flavors isn’t so pronounced, Douglas suggests.

“If you do things in increments, what it does is it broadens your horizons,” he says.

Then, after you’ve tried something, be prepared to come back and tell the person who helped you what you did and didn’t like about it.

“That’s why we’re here,” Douglas says. “We’re just here to broaden your knowledge, but also make your experience a little kinder.” 

Sun Singer offers free wine tastings from noon to 4 p.m. every Saturday.

Ask the expert

Q: You say decorator, I say designer. What's the difference?

A: Have you ever walked into a room and been struck with the feeling that it just “works”? Maybe it's the perfect layout, or how the furniture and finishes make you feel at ease. It's likely that the magic behind that room was crafted by an interior designer or an interior decorator. Their titles sound similar, but they bring different skills and perspectives to the table. So, what's the difference and when should you work with one over the other?

First, let me explain each title and their skill sets. Interior designers can envision how to create a space that meets the functional needs of their client. Think of it as interior architecture. This can include general space planning, lighting design, showering experience design, accessibility and even how a cabinet drawer is designed to accommodate cutlery. Want to move a wall? Interior designers understand how that affects the overall structure. They can also help you choose the right materials, finishes and furnishings that reflect your style while fitting seamlessly into the new layout. Their focus is mainly on the permanent elements of design.

Now, let's say your home's bones are great, but it's in desperate need of a face-lift. You're tired of the gray walls, outdated furniture and lackluster decor. Enter the interior decorator. Interior decorators focus on the visual and tactile elements of a space using color palettes, fabrics, furniture and accessories to create a personalized environment. Unlike interior designers, they won't alter the function of the space through structural changes. Instead, they'll use their sense of style to transform what's already there.

When it's time to decide whom to hire, it comes down to the scope of your project. If you struggle with how you operate in your kitchen or want to get rid of the giant whirlpool tub in your bathroom, an interior designer is your answer. They will help you rethink the space you have. Interior designers can create a deeply personal space that honors the existing architecture of the home.

Starting from nothing with a new build? Again, interior designers are your go-to. They'll work with your architect and builder to ensure every room is personalized in both form and function. They'll help make your new home uniquely yours by

personalizing every detail from placing outlets exactly where you need them to selecting appropriate flooring choices for your lifestyle.

Are you happy with your home's layout, but need a style refresh? Or do you need to convert your home office to a nursery? A decorator can breathe new life into your home. Whether it's a new color scheme, updated furniture or trendy accessories, they'll make your home look and feel fresh without any structural changes.

If you plan to sell your home, an interior decorator can also stage it for you. They know what potential buyers look for and will help you create an environment that makes them fall in love at first sight.

Yes, the line between them



can blur. A designer might start with structural changes and then help with the decor. Conversely, a decorator might suggest minor layout tweaks to better accommodate your new furniture. The key is to understand your project's needs and choose the professional whose skills align with your goals. By choosing the right expert, you can ensure

your home is not only beautiful, but also perfectly suited to your personal needs and style. 

Jeff Kaper is the owner and principal of Spectrum Design Group LLC. With over 30 years of experience, he guides clients in balancing form, function, budget, and disruption to create personalized, lasting spaces.



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