

New England Home

CELEBRATING FINE DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

MAY/JUNE 2009

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PLUS: DRAMATIC ACCESSORIES
FOR OUTDOOR LIVING

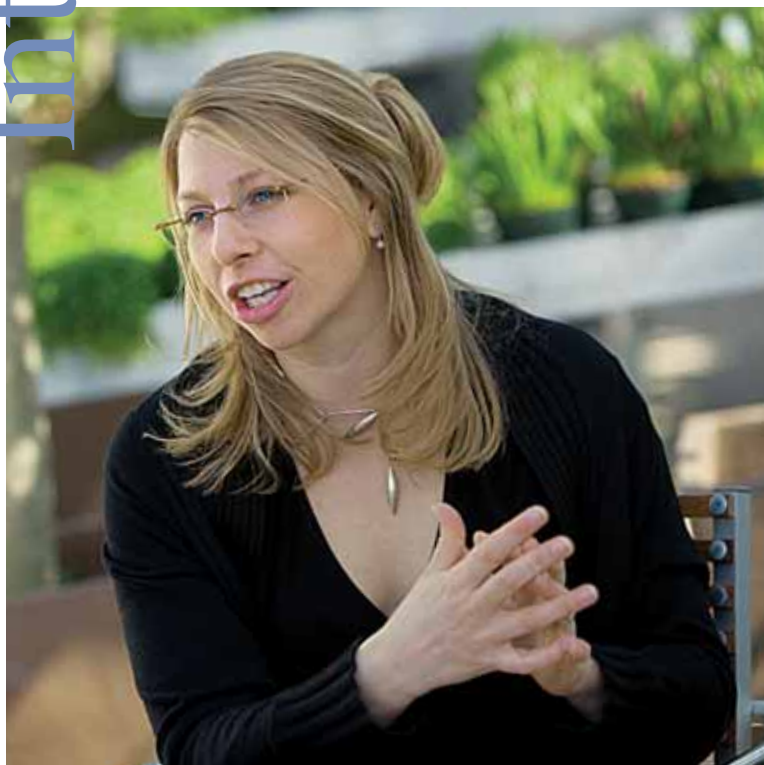
INTERVIEW: KATE KENNEN

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Recently hired as creative director of garden design for Winston Flowers, Kate Kennen comes with an extensive horticultural background and wide-ranging expertise in landscape design and environmental issues. She sat with us for a few minutes not long ago, in one of the company's very pleasant greenhouses, to discuss the relationships between New Englanders and their gardens.

KYLE HOEPNER: You've spent most of your life in gardening, haven't you?

KATE KENNEN: Yes, I grew up at a nursery and garden center in Paxton, Massachusetts, called Pleasant View Nursery. My dad owns it. Our house was right next to the greenhouses, so I literally lived there at the nursery. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to be involved in the planting and garden side of life—it was sort of in the blood, as you can imagine. I started off in horticulture at Cornell, thinking that I wanted to take over my dad's nursery, but then I realized what I wanted to do was more about design. The design of our outdoor environment was more interesting to me. So I got my degree in landscape architecture from Cornell, then worked for two years in Boston and got my registration as a licensed landscape architect. Then I went out to Aspen, Colorado, to work for a landscape architecture firm that focuses both on residential garden design and on ski resort garden design and large-scale planning. I came back to Harvard to get my graduate degree, and had my own practice for three years here in Boston. When this opportunity came along with Winston, the idea to get back to plants, to the base where things had started for me, was really appealing.

KH: Do you find that there is anything particularly characteristic about how outdoor spaces or gardens are structured, or how people relate to them, in New England as opposed to, say, Aspen?

KK: Well, it's different because of climatic reasons. In Aspen, you have a winter season, you have a summer season, and the two off-seasons—and they're literally off because no one's there, it's mud season. In New England you can really

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enjoy all four seasons, and because it's warmer here, you can have a lot more different plant material that can survive. You can really transition all the way from spring, through summer, into fall and into winter with an amazing array of textures and colors and feelings. But the natural landscaping and xeriscape methodology that is very popular in Colorado design is slowly starting to make its way back here. Landscape for me has always been about trying not just to create an aesthetic, but to actually have it function, have it connect to a larger group of systems in its context.

KH: In New England these days there's been a much bigger move back into urban areas.

KK: Right.

KH: I'm sure there are still plenty of very nice suburban projects, but I imagine you're getting more courtyards, roof decks and terraces, too.

KK: We are. The difference between the urban and suburban environments is that idea of systems, what systems influence the urban project versus the suburban project. In a suburban project, the systems that would be important might be habitat and groundwater. In an urban context, heat mitigation might be more important. There are a lot of things you can do in the design of those two different spaces, so that they're not just some incredibly beautiful aesthetic spaces but they also work within their systems.

KH: Do you have any recent projects that illustrate that?

KK: Sure. I did a project in Wellesley Heights, a community with a very pastoral, English feel to it. Instead of just copying the usual look of foundation plantings with grass and sod all around the house and a big pull-up driveway, we first took a look at the regional systems the house sat within. It was in a water conservation district, and the lot was at the bottom of a drainage area for the whole community. So we collected all of the storm water from the roof and from the surrounding properties in a cistern tank, and the cistern tank now recycles everything for irrigation, so it's able to return that hydrology back to the site. I also created a bioswale, a sort of dry riverbed that runs through the

property, with plant materials in a purple and white color scheme. It has an aesthetic function, but it also filters the water. There are plants that take up certain toxins—the term is phytoremediation—so we're able to cleanse the water before it recirculates and comes back for irrigation. We also looked at the ecological systems in the area and realized that there were lots of



birds and rare species habitat, so we researched the native plants that would normally exist in this community and brought some of them back. Now the land fits into its context again, and is both productive and beautiful.

KH: It sounds like you're expanding out from the traditional landscape architect role.

KK: Absolutely. I see my role as becoming a specialist in anything having to do with horticulture and plants, and using them in landscape design that's unique, different than anywhere else. At Winston we're really trying to focus on the softscape, horticultural expertise that we feel is lacking in the industry. We're trying to fill this gap—being someone you can come to who has plant expertise and can tell you what makes sense for a particular space, what can work in a productive way and an aesthetic way, and be low-maintenance and fit in with the environment. We can design it, install it and maintain it, and that's one of the beauties about the way we've structured our department here.

KH: Do you have any ideas for high-end homeowners around New England about how they might want to think about using

their outdoor spaces?

KK: I was talking earlier about the four-season gardening we can have in New England. A lot of people think of using their outdoor areas for just one season, summer, but there are lots of elements now, such as fire pits, that can extend their enjoyment through the fall and even winter.

KH: We've been seeing more outdoor kitchens.

KK: Lots of outdoor kitchens. People want to connect the inside and the outside of their space. Clients are really interested more in the "green" question, too. I used to have to introduce that to

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my clients, but I find more and more that we get interest from our clients who want to know how they can achieve organic, green, sustainable landscapes. One of the other ways we can think of landscape is how it can benefit our social systems and our health, by creating outdoor spaces people want to spend more time in. As I mentioned before, I always use that word *productive*. A landscape can do so many different things, whether it's a private or public landscape. I did a public project for a town on the Cape recently that just won a Boston Society of Landscape Architects award.

KH: Oh, congratulations!

KK: I just found out. The client wanted a landscape for a space that used to hold a gas station. I used plants for phytoremediation to start to remove leads in the soil. I also planted really small plants that, as they grow, can be transplanted to other town projects because the town doesn't have much money. I love it when a landscape can have function. It should always be gorgeous—that should be the benchmark—but then, if you can have this added benefit, that's when I feel you've made a truly successful project. **NEH**