




unbound by tradition

At his circa 1833 Long Island home, designer **Thomas O'Brien** plays up a romantic mix of plants with the key element of any good garden—strong structure. Here's how he corrals billowy blooms into a tranquil paradise.

photographs by MAX KIM-BEE *text by* STEPHEN ORR



A wild ramble of climbing 'New Dawn' roses is kept in check by a crisp hedge, a neat expanse of bluestone and low plants that hide the roses' leggy stems.

Bench "1839 World's Fair"
\$500 Kenneth Lynch & Sons
(203) 792-8363
Straw bag (similar to shown)
\$60 Aero (212) 966-1500

Back garden is framed
privet hedges and
divided into planted squares,
a formal style popular in
English gardens since George
Washington's Mount Vernon.

Skagerak teak "Drachmann"
teakwickerandmore.com
Steel
"Aero" \$1,107 each, janusetc.com
"30" "Sandstone Bristol"
Architectural Pottery
95-3359

Thomas O'Brien for Hickory
Tray" \$1,950 Aero
66-1500
Levolor wood from \$137
jalore.com

*A potted boxwood grounds
the middle of the garden, just as
a centerpiece does a table.*



The repetition of plants keeps a mixed border from feeling like a hodgepodge. Domed rhododendrons echo the round flowers of allium bulbs; here, they've gone to seed after their purple color has faded. The spherical shapes carry a rhythm through the entire length of the flower border.

LUSH, LAYERED PLANT COMBINATIONS

Instead of an overly manicured expanse of lawn and a ribbon of evergreen shrubs hugging the house's foundation—as in many front yards—O'Brien's (above) is rich but relaxed. There is an extrawide bed with a mix of trees, shrubs, perennials and bulbs in a variety of shapes and heights: tall dogwoods, bushy rhododendrons, lollipop-like alliums, roses and ferns. In other spots around the property, O'Brien and Gunn took a similar tack, planting roses in layers: Lofty shrub varieties anchor the beds (right) while shorter rose shrubs carpet the front. O'Brien often uses underplanting, a practice in which lower-growing flowers and herbs weave around taller plants, like the rose bushes, adding softness and creating flow from one plant to the next. Here, perennials like columbine, Russian sage and salvia bloom sequentially and keep the garden interesting when the roses aren't in flower. The hedges, while architectural in form, create coziness and a sense of place.



In a small bed in O'Brien's back garden, perennials weave around the bases of shrub roses for a relaxed effect. The disciplined, soft-colored scheme of white, pale pink, blue and light yellow unifies what could otherwise be a disordered planting.

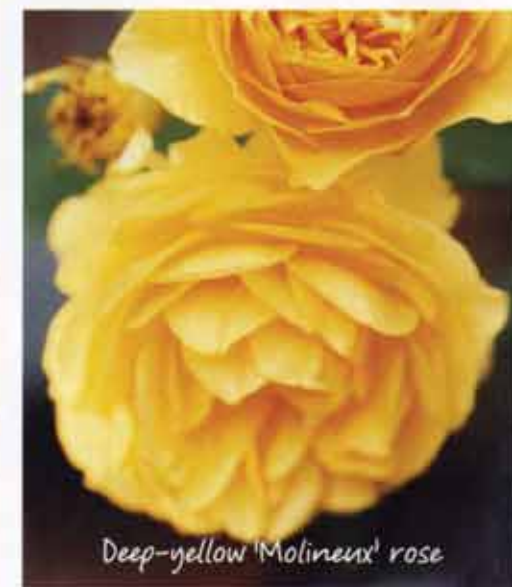
In the fragrant outdoor dining area, with its built-in retro grill, delicate vines of dark purple clematis wind around sturdy canes of climbing roses, the blooms intermingling.



*Climbing 'New Dawn' roses
and 'Jackmanii' clematis*

the secret to happy roses

Good soil enriched with manure, regular water and lots of sunlight are the recipe for success. Prune rose branches in late winter, while they're still dormant, so they keep a full, bushy shape. If you're new to pruning, cut just a few branches the first season to see how they respond. The following year, you can prune more aggressively if needed. O'Brien rarely uses insecticides, but to prevent or treat harmful rose fungi like black spot or powdery mildew, he sprays leaves with all-natural neem oil (neemresource.com). To further protect from fungi, try not to dampen foliage while watering your bushes, and keep the base of plants clear of dead leaves and other debris.



Deep-yellow 'Molineux' rose



'Rambling Rector' rose

EASY ROSES TAKE THE LEAD

With their heady, evocative fragrance and poetic connotations, roses are essential elements in a classical flower garden. Even though they have a reputation as difficult, delicate things that require advanced garden knowledge, some varieties are undemanding enough for even inexperienced gardeners. These roses, which are among O'Brien's favorites, are bred by David Austin and widely sold at garden centers under the name "English Roses" or "Austin Roses." Unlike certain stiff, mid-20th-century hybrids that are almost scentless (you may have received some as cut flowers on Valentine's Day), English roses have a delicious scent and full, old-fashioned blooms. Austin's varieties also have a lot to offer small gardens since they flower two or three times over the growing season, unlike some roses that bloom only once.

'NEW DAWN' AND 'MOLINEUX' DAVID AUSTIN ROSES AVAILABLE AT HEIRLOOMROSES.COM. 'RAMBLING RECTOR' AVAILABLE AT ROSESUNLIMITEDDOWNROOT.COM