

Italian Summer Home—In the City

By Patricia Terry

Medieval courtyard, 15-foot waterfall and rooftop turrets offer flavor of Tuscany without leaving home.

Walking down the quiet, tree-lined street, you'd never suspect that behind one of the narrow Victorian brick houses sits a walled Italian courtyard garden, filled with lushly flowering containers, objects d'arte and a dramatic 15-foot waterfall. It's a taste of Tuscany, the mood of a medieval castle on Chicago's mid-north side.

And that's just at ground level. The roof garden and entertainment center, nestled amidst gold-topped turrets and colorful flower containers, trees and shrubs, also affords a stunning view (on a clear day) of Chicago's iconic John Hancock building and Sears Tower.

"It's the poor man's summer home," jokes owner Ray Capitanini. "Instead of driving to Lake Geneva, we just walk outside. It saves gas." To say nothing of the bumper-to-bumper commute.

More importantly, perhaps, this urban Italian villa reminds Ray and his wife, Nada, of their European roots. Ray's family comes from Montecatini Terme, a small Tuscan town near Florence, while Nada hails from the former Yugoslavia.

Warm weather guests are invited to enter the charming, brick-enclosed courtyard through the side gangway, first passing the front yard filled with 85 boxwoods, hosta, huchera, lamium, burmera and decorative urns. The narrow passageway is enlivened by a small bronze female sculpture and container plantings of Brazilian red rocket, shade loving greens and other visual treats. Once inside the wrought iron gate, set under a thick, rich-textured brick archway, guests are transported to the medieval walled city of Sienna, Italy, with modern city noises left far behind.

The courtyard opens onto a profusion of color, thanks to landscape architect Joe Salerno, of Wheaton-based Joe Salerno Designs, which took on the challenge of providing "lots of color" last year when Nada was under the weather.

Containers filled with deep pink oleander, red geraniums, purple verbena, hot pink New Guinea impatiens, and tiny yellow-orange lantana surround the circular first floor balcony, while three pink climbing rose bushes, varied textures of greenery and a massive pinkish-red rhododendron soften 10-foot walls of aged-looking brick. Adorning the walls, too, are yellowish sandstone-color reliefs of a male torso, a headless female torso and mythological creatures that create an Old World ambience.

FOCAL POINT: THE WATERFALL

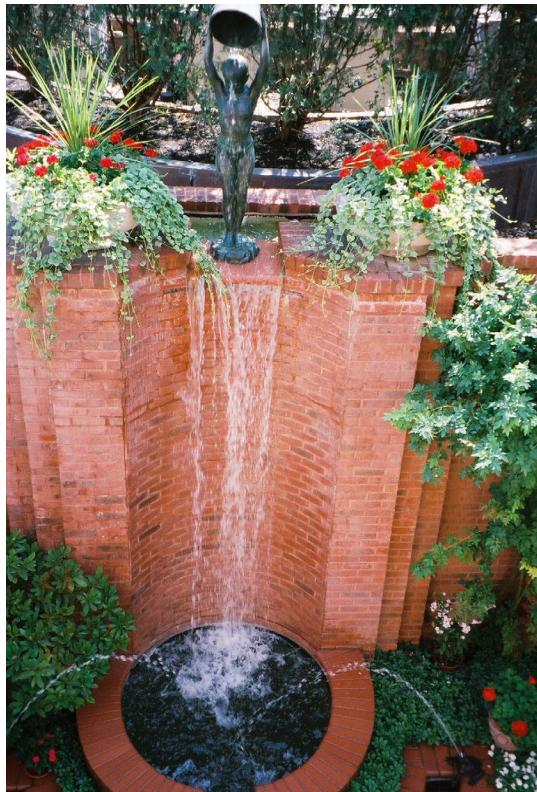
The focal point, though, is a breathtaking 15-foot waterfall, cascading down the brick-walled garage from a large rooftop bronze sculpture, "Boy with Bucket." Flanked by variegated pineapple plants and fines, against Arborvitae, ornamental pears and shrub roses, "Boy" pours his burbling water into a round, brick-encircled pool at bottom, where two iron frogs shoot arcs of water from opposite sides and a stone cherub looks dreamily on. Beds of ivy and white impatiens form outer circles.

After renting for 26 years, Ray and Nada bought what was a two-story house and worked with an architect to raise the roof—literally. But both the house and its multilevel gardens reflect their strong influence.

"After the war (WWII), my dad took the whole family back to Italy to meet the grandparents," explains Ray, "and I fell in love with after Italy. We've traveled there often, and we wanted to capture the feel of the gardens, the villas—particularly those in Tuscany. This is an oasis. You don't feel you're in the city here." However, Ray's family is deeply tied to the city as founding owners of the Italian Village, Chicago's oldest Italian restaurant.

Another strong influence was a film made by famed Italian director Vittorio De Sica, "The Garden of the Finzi-Continis," about a Jewish family that stayed too long in Italy as Fascism took root.

In summer, Ray and Nada often can be found in the courtyard, tending their plants or taking a break for lunch or a beverage. At the wrought iron table, they are serenaded by aged-copper color frog sculptures purchased at the Chicago Symphony Center. Under



a portico along the north wall, a lacy wrought iron bench, between containers filled with deep yellow allamanda, also offers respite.

Small, semicircular balconies on the back of the house flaunt yet more color: on the second floor, a stunning purple Tibouchina; on three, a white Diane (Rose of Sharon). To their right, set in a concave niche, is the regal, stone sculpture of "Lady Fremont"—one of Ray's favorite pieces.

Below the "Lady," a small elevator opens to transport family and guests throughout the five-level house. "It's great way to take people up to the roof without tracking dirt through the house," Ray laughs.

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From there, narrow winding wood stairs lead to the fifth floor "lookout tower" for an incredible view of the city skyline.

UP ON THE ROOFTOP...

"Our summer home is really up on the roof," says Ray. "The elevator transports us away." The couple's rooftop entertainment area boasts a large table and curved banquette, barbecue grill with burners (for pasta), a refrigerator, icemaker, dishes and sink with running water.

Here, too, a profusion of color and texture delight the eye. "Nada wanted to feel alive through her gardens," says Salerno, "so that was my mission." In one container, for instance, he added yellow dahlias, green spikes, pale purple Angelonia and ornamental red and yellow peppers to existing red geraniums and vining vinca. Within scissors' reach of the grill are planters of herbs to suit a passionate Italian chef.

Salerno also opted for a four-season approach, which translates to Pampas grass, a green-blue Globosa and Spartan junipers, which can go through the winter. "The gardens had depended on annuals, with emphasis on geraniums, hibiscus and oleander," he says.

This philosophy is evident, too, on the third floor where curved French doors from the exercise room and the laundry room open onto an intimate, plant filled deck. Emerald and white chaises, identical to those at rooftop, are now at home amidst Japanese maples, white gardenia and topiaries. "We also brought in about 20 cast iron urns to mix with Italian terra cotta for more of an Old World feeling when Ray and Nada look out," says Salerno.

"Now the lady of the house is not stuck in the basement doing laundry," jokes Ray. "She's on the third floor with a beautiful view of a garden."

