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Spring 2007

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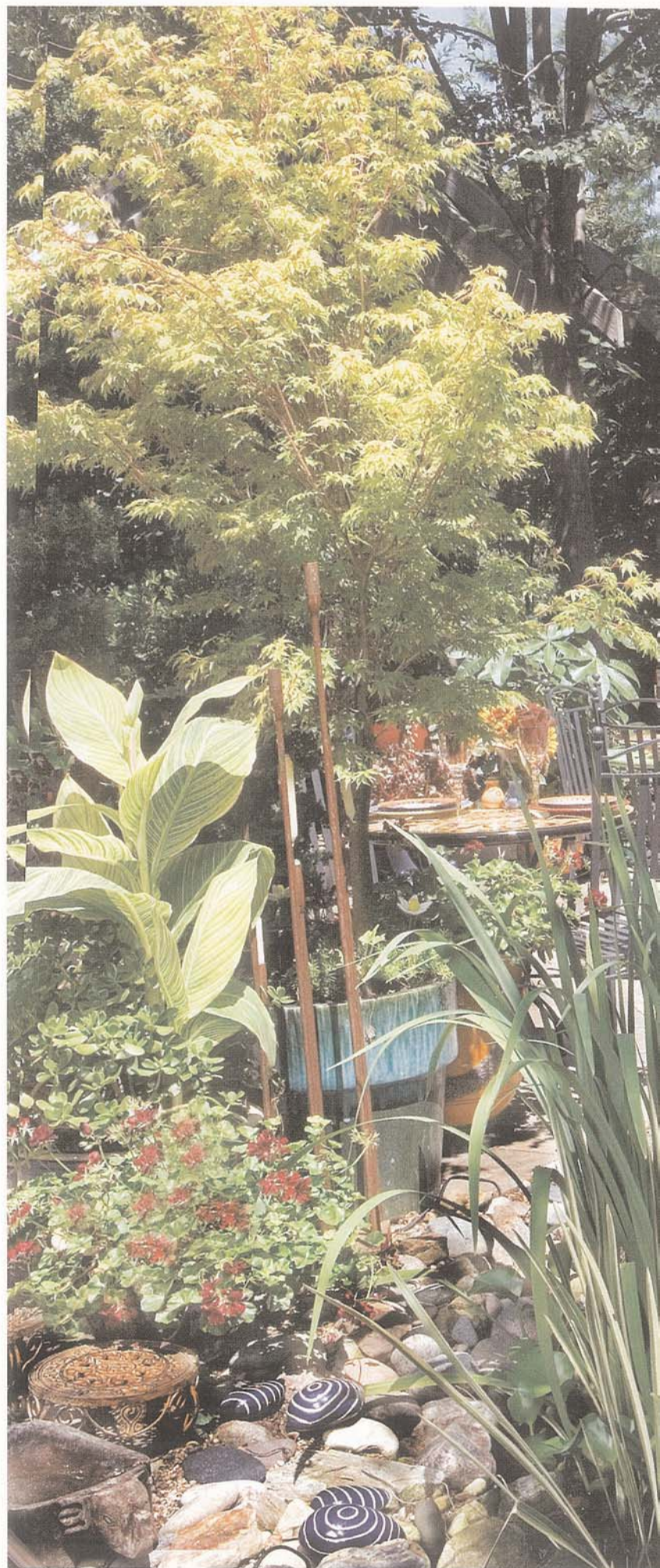
Colorful trompe l'oeil tables and chairs draw guests to the main patio in this lush suburban backyard, where the parties continue nearly year-round.

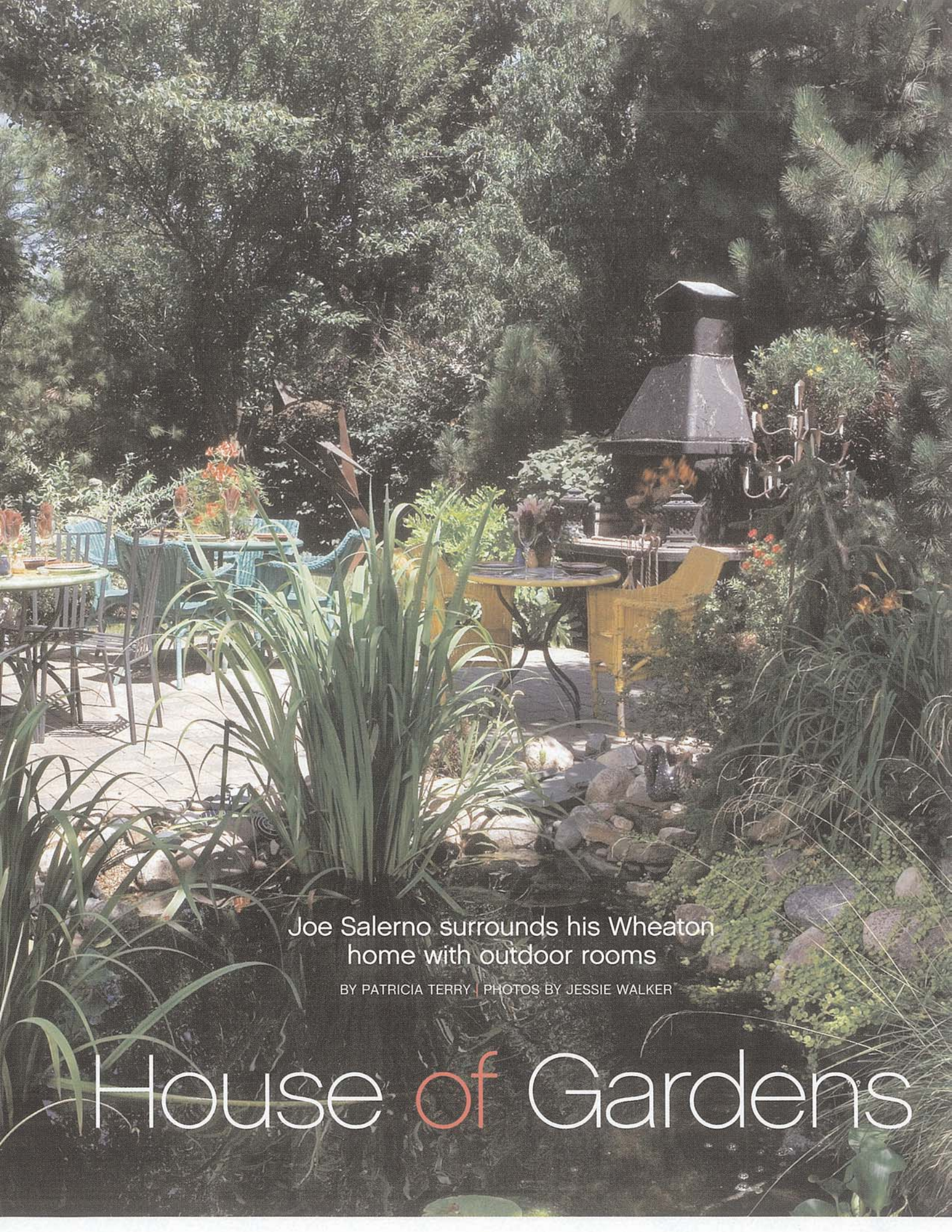
**R**elax. It's all good." That's what landscape designer Joe Salerno tells clients who cannot quite envision what he's planned for their gardens. He planted those words in his own 360-degree garden in west suburban Wheaton to remind himself to sit down, take a deep breath, and enjoy.

Designed as distinct outdoor rooms—foyer, colorful patio with fireplace, intimate lower terrace, kitchen, dining nook, sitting room, and spa—Salerno's multipurpose gardens combine trees, shrubs, and plantings with four handsome waterfalls and art objects galore. "By creating 'rooms' you don't have to stick to one theme," explains Salerno, whose eclectic gardens reflect Asian, Mayan, Italian, and cubist influences.

Each garden room also provides a beautiful view from inside. "I wanted the gardens to be seen from every room in the house," he says. "If you have a window, it's like having a wall space. If you would spend \$5,000 or \$20,000 for a piece of artwork, then your view out that window should also be fabulous."

Landscaping is Salerno's lifelong passion. "My family was in the grocery and funeral businesses, but I didn't like making fruit baskets or painting fingernails," he laughs. He did enjoy learning about fresh flowers, which led to an ever-expanding lawn-care business that paid his way through parochial schools and the University of Illinois, where he earned a degree in landscape architecture.





Joe Salerno surrounds his Wheaton home with outdoor rooms

BY PATRICIA TERRY | PHOTOS BY JESSIE WALKER

# House of Gardens



OPPOSITE PAGE Rough stone steps lead to this more intimate lower terrace, the perfect setting for quiet dinners on a starlit summer evening. THIS PAGE The black bull and rainbow-beaked toucan from Chicago's "Cows on Parade" generate a certain notoriety in Wheaton. His place is known as "the house with the cow," laughs Joe Salerno.

"Actually, Joey got started when he was 10," recalls a neighbor. "He went door to door, handing out business cards that read, 'Serving Wheaton for 10 years.'" Today, at 35, the owner of Joseph Salerno Designs in Wheaton no longer needs to knock on doors, though his garden does stop traffic in his neighborhood.

His landscape is designed to catch the eye. From a rustic gazebo covered in wisteria vines to a rough cedar mailbox and front-door sculpture, visual interest abounds. Artfully arranged trees, shrubs, and planting beds help minimize the wide driveway apron. "It's 3,300 square feet of brick pavers—more square footage than my whole house," laughs Salerno. Coral bells, stephanandra, and a fig tree highlight the gazebo, while lush yellow daylilies and lacy, light green silver mound sparkle nearby.

But the pièce de résistance is "North Holstein," a black bull ridden by a rainbow-beaked toucan, from Chicago's famed "Cows on Parade." And yes, he gets plenty of reaction. "It's known as 'the house with the cow.' And everyone wants to hold a wedding or party

here," he laughs. Arborvitae hug the property line on three sides. "I wanted evergreen walls so that when you looked out, you wouldn't see the neighbors," Salerno says.

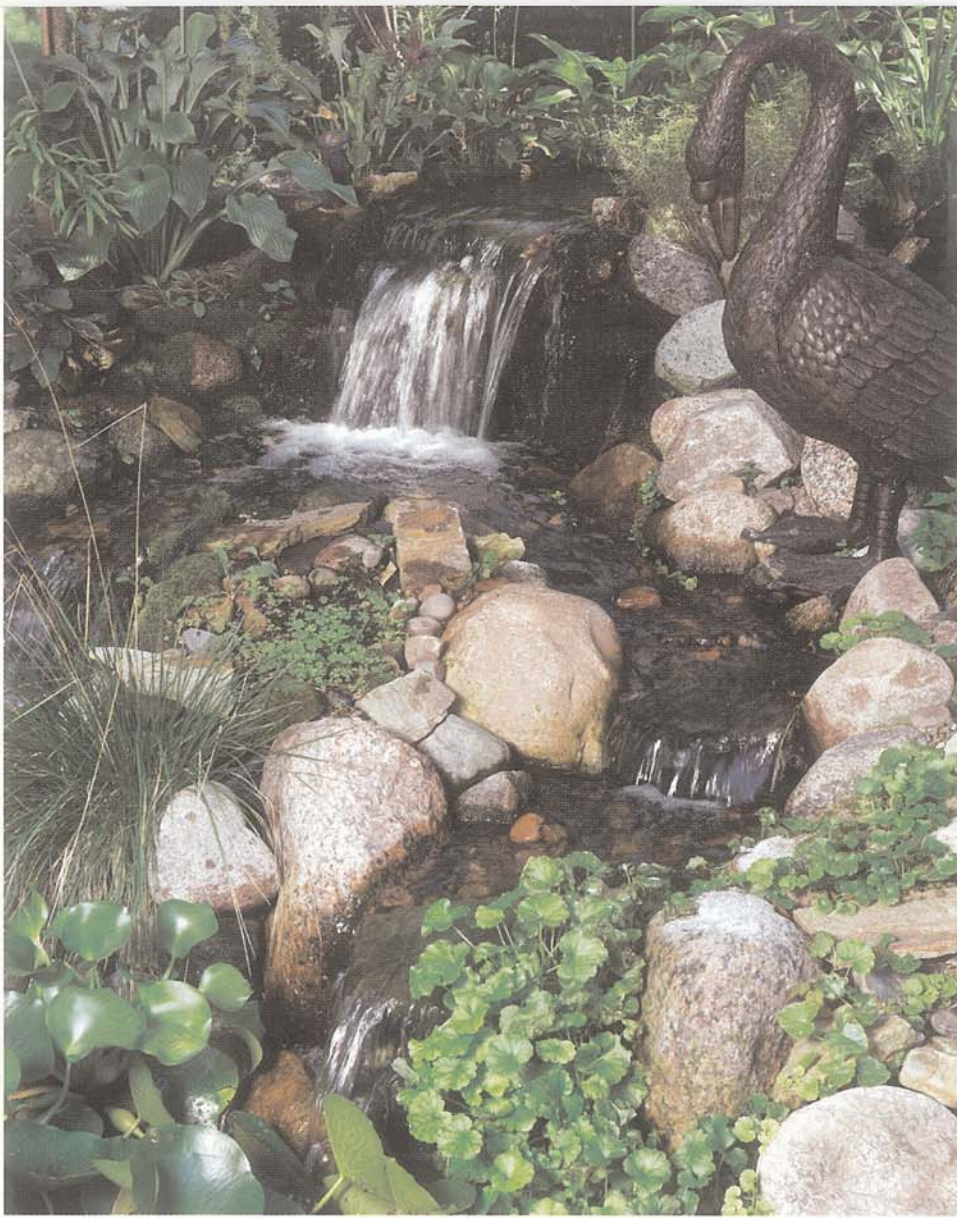
When the path turns at the master bedroom wing, a quiet outdoor sitting room is visible. Cocktail table and chairs set amid weeping larches, lemon bushes, and ferns nearly obscure Salerno's birdhouse collection, including a delft blue porcelain house swinging from a clump-form crab tree. Behind the sitting room, rough stone steps lead to an intimate lower terrace with an intricate cast aluminum table and chairs—and its own waterfall.

Beyond the owners' suite, the wall cuts inward, forming a 90-degree angle with the great room to create a semi-private outdoor dining nook guarded by a life-size terra cotta warrior. Salerno and his partner, Al Gierman, found the terra cotta reproduction on a shopping foray to Minneapolis and picked up the table base in Mexico. The cubist copper centerpiece came from a local artist's estate sale.

The garden's highlight, visible from nearly every







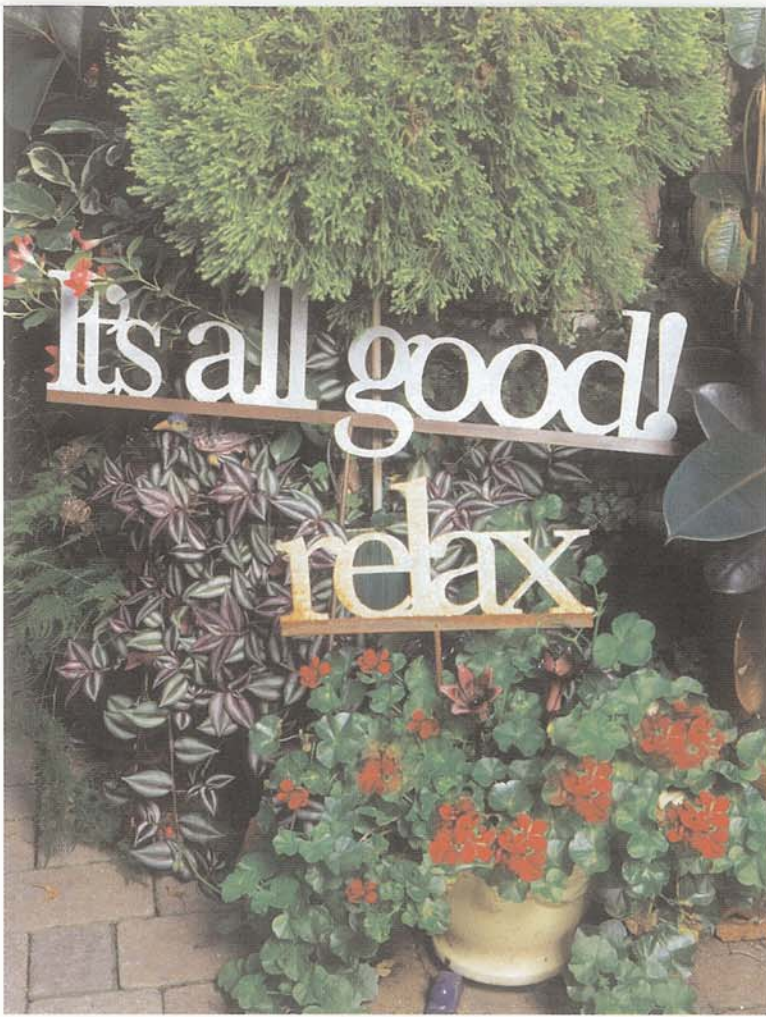
**LEFT** This private dining nook, tucked next to the house, is guarded by a life-size terra cotta warrior. **ABOVE** The double waterfall is visible from nearly every room, inside and out.

room, indoors and out, is a stunning double waterfall protected by two large bronze geese. Nearly perpendicular, the two waterfalls cascade downward to form a pond and stream that meanders back along the path toward the sitting area.

"There was a four-foot grade back here, and it took 22 tons of stone just to build up the back wall that holds up the pond," says Salerno.

Past the waterfalls, the path opens into the entertainment room—a large terrace dotted with colorful, hand-painted trompe l'oeil Italian tables and chairs that are surrounded by lush tropical foliage. A handsome, freestanding Italian fireplace stands at the far side of the terrace, offering warmth when the days grow shorter. Nearby, a five-foot rusted steel candelabrum adds a Salvador Dali touch as its sun-melted candles droop gracefully from their holders. At night, the consummate party-giver replaces them with lighted fresh candles for dramatic effect.

Joe's signs—"Relax" and "It's all good"—are displayed here as well. The expressions are so much a part of his personality and way of doing business that "clients laugh when they see the signs," he says. And they do relax, especially on the



terrace where Joe, a passionate chef, entertains nearly year-round. "Our last outdoor party is New Year's Eve, because we have about 100 people and the house isn't that big," he says. "We use big heaters, so it's still temperate."

Up a few steps, a steel-framed, glass mosaic bistro set depicting marine life welcomes guests to the spa. Beneath a wisteria-covered cedar pergola, the hot tub attracts daytime visitors and late-night stargazers. Rusted steel wind chimes, each creating a different sound, enhance the mood.

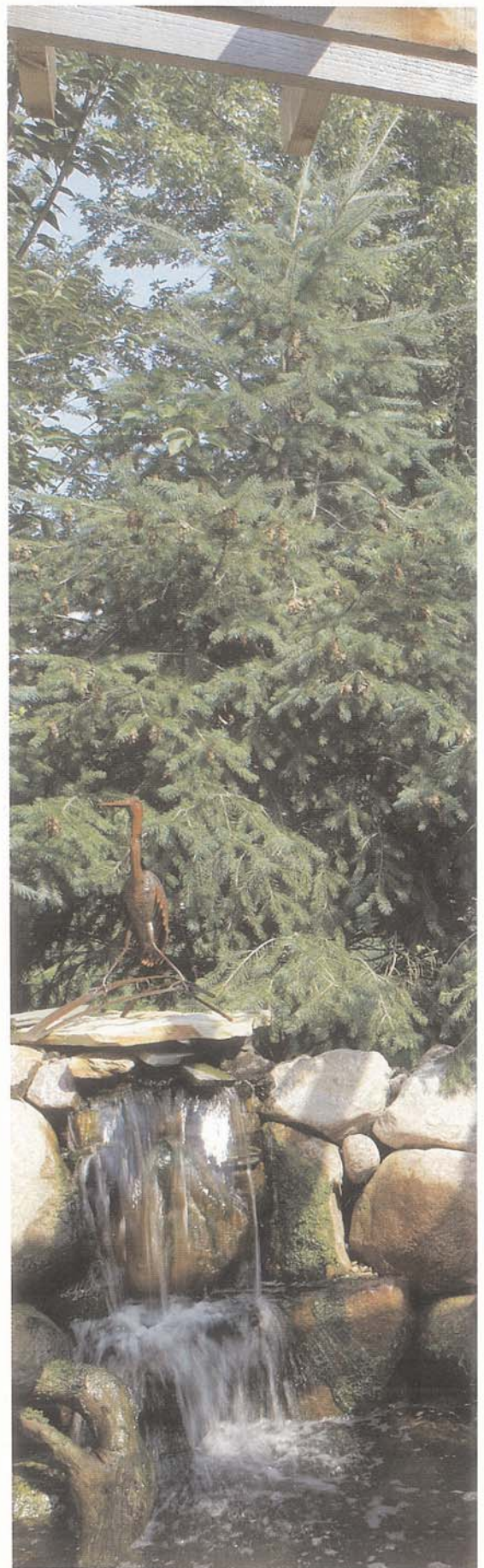
As the path turns the corner, an outdoor kitchen takes shape with a smoker, two large cast-iron grills, and a bar table and stools that allow guests to chat with the chef. A small porch leads to the indoor kitchen and overlooks a small waterfall topped by a sculptured great blue heron.

From there, the path resumes its journey to the garden out front. Unquestionably, a visit to Salerno's series of outdoor rooms gives lush meaning to his motto: "It's all good." **MH**

PATRICIA TERRY IS A CHICAGO WRITER.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON RESOURCES FEATURED IN THIS STORY, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 110.

**ABOVE** Salerno's motto elicits knowing laughs from clients who visit his garden. **RIGHT** Salerno, the consummate entertainer and chef, at work in his outdoor kitchen.







What weekend commute?  
Two Chicagoans visit Tuscany  
outside their own door

BY PATRICIA TERRY | PHOTOS BY JESSIE WALKER



*Summer Home*  
**IN THE CITY**





PRECEDING PAGE Containers brimming with pink oleander, purple verbena, red geraniums, and tiny yellow-orange *lantana* hug the circular back-porch railing and follow the stairs down to the courtyard. THIS PAGE The turreted roofline and curved brick chimney frame spectacular views of the Chicago skyline, this one of the John Hancock building on North Michigan Avenue. OPPOSITE PAGE Water cascades 15 feet from the garage roof into a small, circular pool.

You'd never suspect that behind one of the narrow Victorian brick houses on a quiet, tree-lined street on Chicago's mid-north side sits a walled Italian garden filled with flowering containers, objects d'arte, and a dramatic 15-foot waterfall. But there it is: A small slice of Tuscany with a dash of medieval ambiance.

And that's just at ground level. The roof garden and entertainment center, nestled amid gold-topped turrets and colorful blooms, offers a stunning view of Chicago's iconic John Hancock building and Sears Tower.

"It's the poor man's summer home," jokes homeowner Ray Capitanini. "Instead of driving to Lake Geneva, we just walk outside. It saves gas." Not to mention time spent in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

Even more important, 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 is a native of the former Yugoslavia. "After (World War II), my dad took the whole family back to Italy to meet the grandparents," explains Ray. "I fell in love with Italy. We wanted to capture the feel of the gardens, the villas—particularly those in Tuscany—[in our own garden]."

Summertime guests stroll through a front yard filled with boxwoods, hostas, heuchera, *lamium*, and decorative urns. They enter the brick-enclosed courtyard through the side gangway, traversing a passageway enlivened by a bronze sculpture of a female figure, and containers filled with red-flowered crepe myrtle, and shade-loving greens. Inside the wrought-iron gate, set beneath a brick archway, the sounds of the city are left far behind and the transition to the medieval walled city of Sienna, Italy, is complete.

The courtyard opens onto a profusion of color created by landscape architect Joe Salerno of his eponymous Wheaton-based firm. 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. Three pink climbing rose bushes, a massive pinkish-red rhododendron, and varied textures of greenery soften 10-foot walls of aged-looking brick. Reliefs of a male torso, a female torso, and mythological creatures add to the Old World mystery.

But it all just sets the stage for the waterfall: a breathtaking, 15-foot cascade, tumbling down the brick-walled garage from a large bronze sculpture on the roof. Flanked by variegated pineapple plants, arborvitae, ornamental pear trees, and shrub roses, *Boy with Bucket* pours his burbling water into a round, brick-encircled pool. Two iron frogs shoot arcs of water from the pool's perimeter, while a stone cherub looks dreamily on. All is ringed by beds of ivy and white impatiens.





Long-time renters, Ray and Nada decided to create their Tuscan paradise immediately after purchasing what was then a two-story house. They worked with John Robert Wiltgen, an Chicago architectural designer, to raise the roof—literally—and design the multilevel gardens. The couple credits Ray's Italian heritage (his family founded the Italian Village, Chicago's oldest Italian restaurant) and the film *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, by famed Italian director Vittorio De Sica, with inspiring them. And are they ever delighted with the results. "This is an oasis," Ray says. "You don't feel you're in the city here."

During the summer, Ray and Nada often can be found in the courtyard, tending their plants or taking a break at the wrought-iron table, serenaded by copper frog sculptures purchased at the Chicago Symphony Center. Under a portico along the north wall, a lacy, wrought-iron bench, set between containers filled with deep yellow *allamanda*, offers another place to relax.

Small, semicircular balconies on the back of the house brim with yet more color: on the second floor sits a stunning purple *tibouchina*, and the third floor boasts a white 'Diana' hibiscus. On the right, set in a concave niche, is the regal stone sculpture of *Lady Fremont*—one of Ray's favorite pieces.

Below the sculpture, a small elevator opens to transport family and guests to the various levels of the house. Narrow, winding wood stairs lead to a fifth floor tower that provides a view of the city skyline.



“Our summer home is really up on the roof,” says Ray. The rooftop entertainment area includes a large table and curved banquette, barbecue grill with burners (for cooking pasta), a refrigerator, icemaker, dishes, and a 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.” One container, for instance, bursts with yellow dahlias, green spikes, pale purple *angelonia*, ornamental red and yellow peppers, and red geraniums. Within scissors’ reach of the grill are planters of herbs to suit a passionate Italian chef.

The vibrant colors extend to the third floor as well, where curved French doors from the exercise and laundry rooms open onto an intimate, plant-filled deck. Emerald and white chaises, identical to those on the rooftop, are now at home amid Japanese maples, white gardenias, and topiaries. “Now, the lady of the house is not stuck in the basement doing laundry,” says Ray. “She’s on the third floor with a beautiful view of a garden.” **MH**

PATRICIA TERRY IS A CHICAGO FREELANCE WRITER.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON RESOURCES FEATURED IN THIS STORY, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 123.

OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW  
Undulating brick walls at  
the rear of the house flank  
Juliet balconies. ABOVE  
The rooftop entertainment  
center has everything the  
Capitaninis need for alfresco  
dining—including fresh  
vegetables and herbs within  
the chef’s reach. THIS PAGE,  
RIGHT At the end of a narrow  
gangway, visitors enter this  
art-filled courtyard. Faux  
stone reliefs of human torsos  
and mythological creatures  
mingle with bright plantings  
along the brick walls.

