

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL BUT BIG IS GOOD, TOO, IN THE 2003 GREAT GARDEN CONTEST

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SHE DIDN'T know it at the time, but when Cheryl Verde won a prize in last year's Great Garden Contest, she was setting a tone -- in certain ways -- for this year's competition.

Her garden in Clayton is quite small -- 25 feet long and 15 to 25 feet wide, in an L-shaped configuration.

It is beautifully designed and packed with interesting -- some might say quirky -- plants for such a small space.

And Verde captured the setting very nicely in images that she sent in to the contest.

In other words, she did what several categories in this year's contest should focus on: creative and well-photographed, if modest, home gardens.

The 2003 Post-Dispatch Great Garden Contest is switching gears a bit, to serve readers whose opinions we asked for last fall.

"Thanks to some great input," says Ken Miller, a founder of the Great Garden Contest and owner of The Bug Store, "we wanted to expand our contest this year to embrace gardeners with smaller yards or who have more modest projects."

And so this year, there is an amateurs-only category called "Best Home-Garden Design by an Amateur." The winner will get a lofty prize of \$1,000 in garden-center gift certificates for first place. And he or she also will get the plaque pictured on the cover of Lifestyle, created for the contest by artist Diane Sauer of Trellis Art Designs.

But there's the equal honor of "Best Home-Garden Design by an Amateur With Professional Help," bringing \$1,000 to that top prize-winner as well. Professional help, by the way, means advice on design and plant installation but not the weeding and watering that some folks contract out to garden services.

Other categories are "Best Home Flower Garden," "Best In-ground Apartment or Condominium Garden," "Best Container Garden" and "Best Garden Tended by a Group."

There is no "Best Garden Photography" category this year. But judges are calling for good photos to help them make final decisions.

Verde, who won second place last year in "Best Overall Design" for her tiny space, says that last year's contest helped her, as a gardener and a photographer, in many ways.

She has cashed in nicely on her gift certificates, she says, to get, among other things, a large flowering hibiscus tree.

She's had her "15 seconds of fame," she says, and then some. "It's just been a lot of fun. People still mention it. People I meet occasionally say, 'How's your garden doing?' And 'I remember seeing the article in the newspaper.'"

She's also organizing a garden tour of her neighborhood, called Old Town Clayton. It's just north of the Clayton business district and bounded by Brentwood Boulevard on the west and Jackson Avenue on the east.

And her skills as a Web page and garden designer come together with a new Web site for the Old Town neighborhood, illustrated with her own garden images.

"I have a big interest in digital photography," Verde says, "and I shoot hundreds of pictures of my garden, but I scan in just a few of the best. "That's how I think I won the contest last year," she says with a laugh. "I took a very good picture, early in the morning, when light was just right."

>See contest rules on page 19.

DO YOU have more questions about the Post-Dispatch 2003 Great Garden Contest?

Feel free to e-mail or phone in your queries to either of the following Lifestyle staffers:

(1) Color Photo by CHERYL VERDE - Small gardens, such as this winner in overall design from last year's contest, are a big part of this year's competition. This is Cheryl Verde's town house garden in Clayton.

(2) PHOTO by JERRY NAUNHEIM JR. / POST-DISPATCH - Big gardens also figure in this year, especially in the category of Best Home-Garden Design by an Amateur With Professional Help. A contest winner last year, Ken Body of Ladue, had extensive help from garden designer Valerie Levi.

(3) PHOTO by JERRY NAUNHEIM JR. / POST-DISPATCH - Gardens done by a group are an important category in the Post-Dispatch Great Garden Contest. Last year's top winners were 30 volunteer gardeners with "**Olivette in Bloom.**"

(4) PHOTO by ANNE SKIDMORE - Photography always is important in the contest, because judges award prizes primarily from the photos that entrants send in. This close-up image of lamium blooms in Anne Skidmore's garden in Ferguson won her a top prize last year.