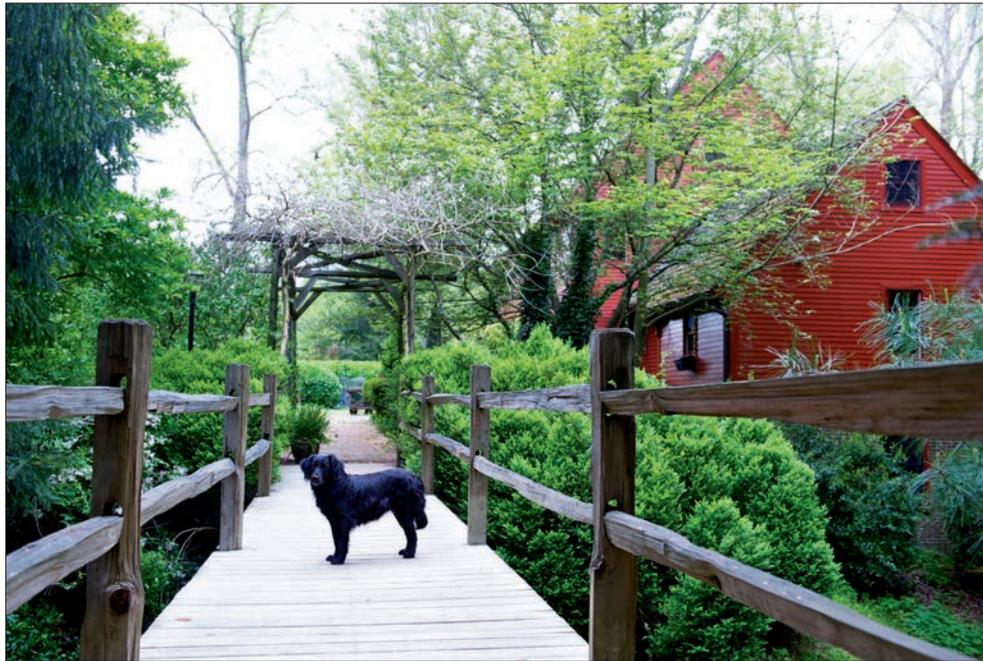


Growing  
**UP**

# CARLOTTIS

The star garden designer's path to success started with a unique Kentucky upbringing.

**TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ABBY LAUB**



**Lucille Carloftis** recalls looking outside with her late husband, **Carlo**, and joking that spring must be here because their youngest son, **Jon**, was outside with his wheelbarrow. “He had his little wheelbarrow out there, and he’d be out there working on things,” she smiled. “And he had his little white dog with him—oh, he was so cute out there working.”

Thirty-something years later, Jon Carloftis is a hotshot New York City rooftop garden designer, has two white dogs following him around, and loves to spend time working again on his family’s property in Livingston—now the Rockcastle River Trading Company.

“I just remember my earliest memory of getting a wheelbarrow out,” Jon recalled. “I was just fascinated with getting that wheelbarrow out and working on things.”

It was the natural beauty he grew up in with space to “garden” as a youngster—thanks to the business his parents owned in the rolling hills of Rockcastle County—that piqued his interest in all things horticultural and began his path as a highly sought-after garden designer in New York, all over Kentucky and beyond.

### **Doing things the native way**

Carlo and Lucille built a popular roadside attraction off U.S. 25, the main north-south highway before Interstate 75 was built. Nestled on the Rockcastle River, surrounded by thick woods and rolling hills, the couple’s frontier town was highlighted by American Indians living on the property and creating authentic, handmade crafts to sell in a roadside store. Fort Sequoyah, as it was named by the American Indians in residence, had horses (real and mechanical), an outdoor theater, boat rides on the river, musical performances, a museum, a train from Cherokee Park in Louisville, log cabins and much more to entertain travelers.

The couple, fascinated with Native American culture, had traveled the country and were happy to bring natives and their crafts to the Kentucky location. They employed expert basket weavers, totem pole artists, blacksmiths, moccasin makers and others. In total, there were about eight to 10 American Indians living on the property throughout the years, with many more coming and going for a week or a month at a time.

“Indians began coming from the other reservations across the country,” Lucille said. “They were even here from Yuma, Arizona. We had a medicine man here; he was the most colorful man.”

That color, creativity and ingenuity influenced the six Carloftis children—three sons and three daughters. Fort Sequoyah was a family-friendly attraction for visitors and a unique environment in which to raise a family. Lucille said it was “absolutely wonderful” raising her children there, and she also “couldn’t believe” how successful the business became. “The children, they just played. It was wonderful—we never worried about them,” she recalled. “They were all over this property; they were in the river; they were swinging on the grapevines; they were playing in the trees. You talk about free spirits ...”

Opening on July 3, 1955, Fort Sequoyah operated until Carlo passed away in 1990. Lucille, now 84, re-opened the property with Jon 16 years ago as Rockcastle River Trading Company as it took on a more garden-themed focus.

The 50-acre Carloftis family homestead is now marked

by impeccable gardens and crowned with the family's 40-year-old home that was built to look like a 1600s colonial manor. An antique post office, a one-room schoolhouse and several other outbuildings sit on the property, surrounded by beautiful gardens designed by Jon.

Visitors can come simply to gain garden inspiration, see a live bird collection—including a giant white peacock—shop in the store for beautiful (and many Kentucky Proud) products for home and garden, pick up garden essentials, or simply enjoy the property with a picnic or a good book. Jon often can be found on the property giving lectures, dispensing gardening advice, weeding the flower beds, preparing for a party with New York clients on a spacious porch overlooking the river, or hanging out with his lovable Labradors, Kate and Lilly.

When visiting Rockcastle River Trading Company “you’re going to see how to create a garden. There’s formality in the gardens here, but you don’t really know it’s there,” Jon said. “And we’re in an area where there’s lots of beautiful things, lots of hiking trails.”

Lucille said she is happy with the new direction her family’s property has taken, but she still fondly remembers the past as she shows off jewelry, baskets and other gifts and memorabilia given to her by the Native Americans who for years were like family to her. She is working on her fourth book—this one about “Mrs. Paytiamio,” an elderly Native American woman who lived on the property and was Lucille’s mentor when she was a young wife, mother and business owner. “I held on to her every word when she came here,” Lucille said.

Lucille’s first book was called *Favorite Recipes from a Treasury of Country Inns and Lodges* and had a sequel publication on desserts. Her third book, *A Beautiful Journey*, tells the history and stories of Fort Sequoyah and her life of adventure with her late husband. Lucille said her husband’s innovative spirit is part of what made the family’s business such a success and that he passed those traits on to Jon. She joked that Jon’s green thumb did not come from her but from Carlo, who often took Jon for walks in the woods and pointed out plants along the way.

Today, her children—who all embarked on professional careers—remain close to her and still enjoy time on the homestead, but she said she doesn’t get to New York City as often as she would like. When she does, she is amazed at her youngest son’s success. Jon downplays his mother’s compliments and refers to her as “Momma,” like he is still a kid—one who never left and made a wildly successful career for himself.

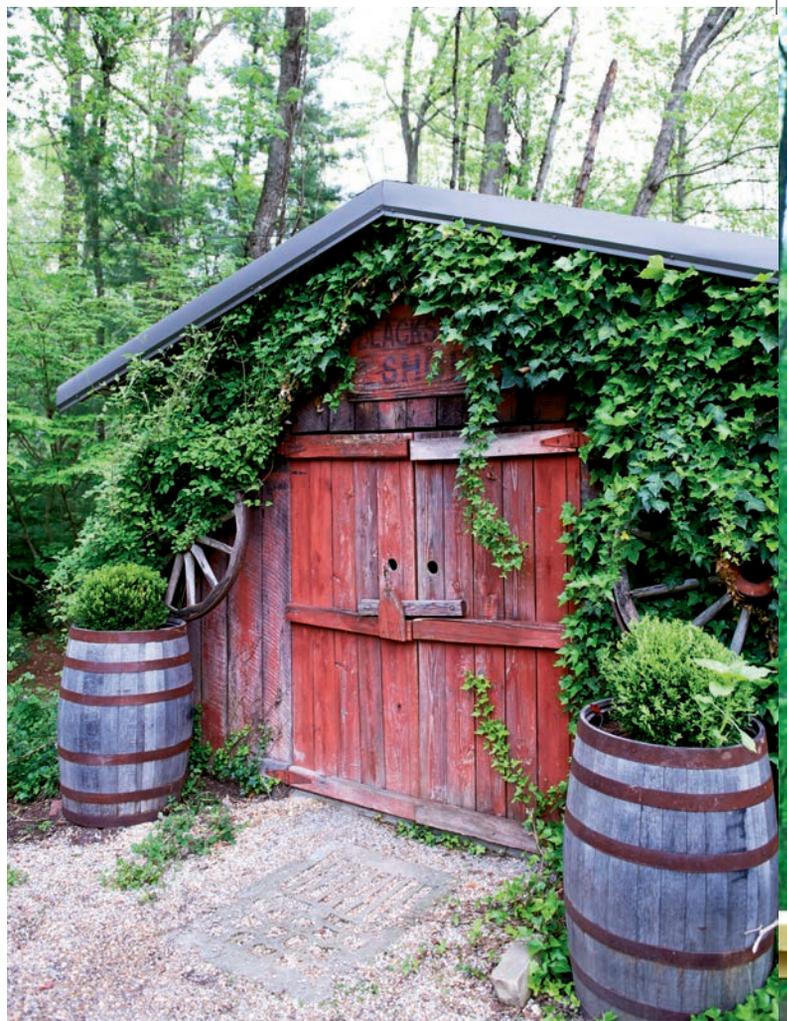
“You see, Jon has always stayed ahead of us, to tell you the truth,” Lucille said. “We couldn’t put our finger on him ... Jon was always thinking ahead, and even when he was in fifth grade, he could have been a real troublemaker in school.”

His innovation and plant knowledge may have come from his father, according to Lucille, but his hard-working spirit is all her. She still works full time in the store and is happy to give visitors some stories from the past when they visit. “I have worked mighty hard here, but I never thought we worked. I loved it,” she said, adding, “I think I wouldn’t enjoy it” if she stopped working.

## A career in transition

Running Rockcastle River Trading Company with his mother and having the help of his longtime partner, Dale Fischer, has provided Jon the chance to reconnect with his Kentucky home after spending 24 years in New York City. While he still maintains a full load of clients outside of Kentucky and a home in Bucks County, Pa., as well as Lexington, the 47-year-old said coming home is always great.

But he hasn’t exactly put his feet up recently. Carloftis



*Jon and his mother, Lucille*



designed a garden for the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games and since has expanded his partnership with Alltech to include an all-natural, Kentucky Proud plant food line, Jon Carloftis Premium Plant Products. The line includes Bloom & Fruit and Soil & Root and promotes more sustainable, vibrant gardening.

He has formed a partnership with Lexington-based Longwood Antique Woods (see story, page 60) to create the America Reclaimed Garden Collection and works with the company on many other unique products across the state. He has built up his Kentucky private client base and recently was featured in *Country Living* magazine for the Ultimate Kitchen Garden he built with Longwood at his alma mater University of Kentucky's Arboretum. Oh, and he is collaborating with Louisville Stoneware, and completed several Kentucky Derby projects, including another partnership with Longwood for *Garden & Gun* magazine.

### Destiny realized

As a child, Jon said, he "couldn't put two and two together, truly, but I had a total photographic memory." At a young age, he mastered plant identification and could memorize anything. He said he's "fascinated with people that can make a paintbrush with nothing but their mind. I can't do that, but I can do it with plants."

Carloftis did not always recognize his love for plants would lend itself to a career, so he went to the University of Kentucky to study business. He hung out in the agriculture fraternity but did not want to study "fert and dirt," he said. But as soon as he finished his four-year degree, Jon said he realized he had missed his true calling and went back for horticulture classes. Upon graduation, he left his small-town upbringing for the big city. "I knew I had to do something," he said. "I knew I had to live and see the world a little bit. I was sort of sheltered down here."

His rooftop gardening business grew out of simple ambition and now his clients are celebrities and millionaires. His country, Kentucky upbringing served him well. Carloftis said he took rustic Kentucky tobacco sticks to Park Avenue and did tomatoes with tobacco sticks tied with copper twine. "It was earthy, and it was just what I knew, and they loved it," he said. "I was bringing in moss from the creek behind my house."

And those wildflowers that most people try to kill in their grass? Carloftis scoops them up, surrounds them with pine, and takes them to his clients as table centerpieces. "They're gorgeous. Why would you kill something like that that's so beautiful?" he asked dubiously.

A tree-covered wooden bridge spans a formidable ditch at his Kentucky homestead, almost giving the middle of the property a peaceful, tunnel-like effect, and Jon said that is incorporated into every garden he designs. "It can be low it can be high ... Somewhere, you have to escape from the real world into the garden space," he said. "You might be three feet away from where you were, but all of the sudden you're in a different world." He said the bridge has been on the property his whole life, and it stirred something in him that he did not realize until recently, as he was incorporating the tunnel effect into his rooftop gardens.

### The secret to garden success

Jon's inspiration comes mostly from his clients and a desire to never be stagnant in his work. "I'm 47, but I'm



going on 12," he said, flashing a boyish grin. "I think a lot of that is about always being interested. I always want to meet new people; I want to learn something; I want to see things."

Telling the story of each of his clients' lives is what makes him tick in his garden design work. "Part of the secret is each one is a different story," he said, adding that some garden designers try to put too much of themselves into their creations. "Part of the whole exciting part for me is getting to know people and liking them. I have to like a client, or it's just not going to work as well."

He spends time getting to know a client's tastes, what the inside of their home is like, their favorite colors, and how they spend their time. "At the end of each one, you're a better garden designer," Jon said. "It looks like you, but it really looks like them, and that's why they're almost always happy."

Sure, he said, he's made mistakes along the way, but he takes it all in stride. "Whatever you do, that's part of growing," he said. "Everything you do—the bad job, the good job, everything you do—you're getting something out of it if you look at it that way."

He joked that sometimes he just has to "drop back and punt" when the going gets tough. When that happens, he is happy to escape New York.

After starting his business in the city and living in it for several years, he knew he needed a change. "I'm not the type to sit at brunch and chitchat about nothing," he said. "You know what I mean? I want to be with my dogs out in the country. I like a good time, but I like going to a party and then leaving ... I have to get out, and then I have an open mind and come back with a fresh start." That's why he established his home in Pennsylvania on a river, in an area that he said reminds him a lot of his childhood home.

But his real home is Kentucky, and having spent a lot of time over the years at his home in Lexington, Jon said he is very pleased with how much the city has changed. "I'm just so happy to know that Lexington is now fun," he said with a laugh. "Lexington was never fun growing up, so I'm glad it's evolved into someplace where I want to be."

Now that he is around more, Jon is happy to see the city and its people take a great interest in growing their own vegetables and caring more about preservation and culture and embracing the work he has strived so hard to build.

If he works nearly as hard as his mother, Carloftis and his garden expertise are just beginning to fully take root.

# Gardening on the cheap

Garden design does not have to be reserved for those with deep pockets, and expert designer Jon Carloftis said some of his favorite designs have been some of his cheapest to pull off.

“First of all, I think it’s a good idea to do your garden in stages,” he said, adding that this approach is easier on the budget. “And I think, no matter what you do, build a little raised vegetable bed, because if you have children, they need to learn. If you love it, it makes sense. There’s nothing fresher.”

He suggested then identifying an area that would be the most useful and enjoyed and starting a garden there. Once you have identified the best area, begin putting the pieces together and consider these tips from Carloftis:

- 1. Get good soil.** Carloftis said the biggest mistake people make with a garden is poor soil. “Some people try to work with what they’ve got, and they’re always disappointed,” he said.
- 2. Stick with a color.** Think about the colors you like to wear and what is in your home, he said, and carry that over into your garden to have a unifying theme.

## Jon’s favorite Kentucky native plants

- **SOURWOOD TREES.** Jon calls them the “most underused Kentucky tree. They’re like four seasons of heaven.”
- **BIG LEAF MAGNOLIAS.** The most “exotic thing you can have in a garden.”
- **SYCAMORE TREES**
- **VIRGINIA BLUE BELLS.** “Heavenly”
- **WILD MOUNTAIN PHLOX**

- 3. Think about incorporating water someplace in the garden.** “The sound of water changes the feel of the space,” he said.

- 4. Pick a texture to unify the space and provide continuity,** whether it is reclaimed wood garden boxes or lead-colored

client’s lead-colored basic containers that are modern in appearance to match her modern home. “She has a lot of modern paintings in her house, and I noticed that her accents were all blues, like seaside blue, so I’m going to pull that out as the color,” he said, adding that he had splashes of glossy blue decorations and pots in the garden.

- 5. Go to a junkyard or a cheap home store and look for unexpected items to use as planters or tools** for plants to climb. Carloftis said one of his favorite finds was a cast iron chair thrown out on the curb in New York that he ended up using as a beautiful piece for tomato plant vines to grow. “Or just look in your basement,” he said. “People have all of this stuff.”

- 6. Stick with basic green plants and think of shades of green.** Jon said most greenery is cheap. “I never met a fern I didn’t like,” he said. “Shades of green are so beautiful and classic in a garden. You don’t have to have a lot of color. And plants have never been less expensive.”

- 7. And the best penny-pinching tip of all? Get your friends to help.**

containers or ultra-cheap and super modern-looking feed troughs from Tractor Supply. Carloftis cited a current

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Art in the Gardens at Liberty Hall

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