

914inc Magazine 2011:

Westchester County's Most Accomplished Women Entrepreneurs

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Born with a Green Thumb

Jan Johnsen

Founder and Co-Principal, Johnsen Landscapes & Pools

When she was in the third grade, Jan Johnsen planted corn seeds on the windowsill of her family's New York apartment. She soon branched out to the fire escape, where pots of flowers and vegetables thrived. At 16, she won first prize in the Manhattan borough-wide science fair with an experiment on how sound affects the growth of plants. "My teacher thought it was a stupid idea," she says, "and that made me want to do it more. I just intuitively knew there was a connection." Since then, scientists have learned that the high-frequency vibrations of birdsong open up the pores on plant leaves so that they absorb more air and nutrients.

After 15 years of working for other firms, Johnsen opened her own landscape company in 1986 with just \$3,000. "I bought a used computer from the PennySaver and started out in a one-room office I rented from a tree company."

Her husband, Rafael Algarin, joined her six months later. "It was slow going at first," she says, "and it took about three years to really take off." The firm has since grown to 15 employees. Johnsen has designed gardens as far away as New Orleans and Hawaii and many have been featured in numerous magazines and books. Johnsen also teaches a graduate-level course in landscape design at Columbia University, is an instructor at the New York Botanical Garden, and has authored several garden-design books.

"It's more than a full-time job," she admits. "That's where the passion comes in. Mine is to share what I've learned with the rest of the world."

Johnsen counts Bill and Hillary Clinton among her many clients. "Both are connected to the outdoors—and Hillary, in particular, loves flowers. They both truly do take time to smell the roses." Which is what Johnsen hopes her creations inspire in every client. To that end, she currently is writing a book called *Tranquility by Design*, which includes her secrets for creating serene outdoor spaces.

—NLC