

FALL 2007 | THE PLAIN DEALER

SOPHISTICATED HOME

Gray matters

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Woodland wonder

Mystical backyard retreat in Moreland Hills

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THE PLAIN DEALER

A retreat from the world

In serene woodland setting, life's daily strains drift away

Friday, October 12, 2007

Jill Sell

Two identical red Adirondack chairs perch at the end of civilization. The chairs face a wetland ravine and turn their backs on modern, hectic 21st century living. Below is untouched Ohio woodland. Mayapples and the giant leaves of skunk cabbages shelter tiny creatures in warm seasons. Fallen logs and huge, reach-to-the-sky trees embrace hibernating animals in fall and winter. A small tributary can be followed to the Chagrin River.

Donna and Mike Ludwig of Moreland Hills call the seating area, ringed by ostrich ferns, the meditation spot of their 2-acre property. Bright-red furniture is unexpected in this serene, leafy environment.

"We wanted elements of surprise in our yard," says Donna, who moved with her family from an urban area of Chicago in 2004.

But primarily, the couple wanted their home -- inside and out -- to be peaceful, with clean lines and a subtle Asian influence. Mike is co-owner of Pulsar Products in Cleveland and a designer and manufacturer of paper-craft and scrapbooking materials. His frequent business trips to the Far East have given him an appreciation for Asian design.

The Ludwigs knew they had the outdoor setting for what they envisioned. But even Mother Nature can use a helping hand once in awhile. Their helper was Heidi O'Neill, owner of O'Neill Landscape Design and Installation in Chagrin Falls. Her goal: Create a seamless flow between the house and the back yard and open the area so the view of the woods and ravine would be unobstructed.

A concrete sidewalk at the back of the house was removed and replaced with a three-tiered Pau Lope deck. Pau Lope is a Brazilian hardwood, and the decking the Ludwigs chose carries the Forest Stewardship Council trademark, which certifies that it has been harvested responsibly. The wood is insect- and fire-resistant and one of the hardest decking woods available.

A slender black wrought-iron railing near the ravine was necessary for safety reasons. But it was custom-made to be camouflaged.

"I remember the day they installed the railing," says Donna, a former registered nurse who's doing duty as "the kids' chauffeur" and as a spin instructor. "I came home and didn't even notice it. It seems funny that it took all that work to create something invisible."

A comfortable brown and light aqua-blue rattan seating area echoes the colors of the home's siding and bluestone patio. A large glass-topped table defines the "dining room" of the outdoor entertainment area.

"The table is shiny, because contrast is needed in a shade or green garden like this one," says O'Neill. "You don't need a lot of brightly colored flowers, but a little bit of sparkle is important."

With that design element in mind, a huge urn that winks in the sunlight is filled with giant burgundy bamboo reeds and anchors a corner of the patio.

Several plants were also selected for their glossy leaves.

Plants that add dots of color include Red Sprite winterberry, *Ilex verticillata*, and Visions in Red astilbe, *Astilbe chinensis*. Plum Pudding coral bells are known for their pewter gray and silver foliage with deep purple undertones.

The Dwarf Serbian Spruce, *Picea omorika*, is an evergreen with short, glossy needles. The fascinating Sargent Weeping Hemlock, *Tsuga canadensis*, and the Globe Blue Spruce, *Picea pungens glauca*, create substance and depth in the yard.

The Bloodgood Japanese Maple, *Acer palmatum*, and the Japanese Solomon's Seal, *Polygonatum odoratum*, also add to the garden's theme and integrity.

The Izo No Hana Hydrangea, *Hydrangea macrophylla*, from Japan and the David Bissett Bamboo, *Phyllostachys bissetti*, are two of the more exotic plants in the Ludwigs' yard.

"The bamboo is a wonderful plant, and in May and June, it can grow a foot a day," O'Neill says. "But you need a 3-foot-deep barrier, because bamboo can become invasive."

O'Neill credits Klyns Nursery in Perry Township and Auburn Pointe Greenhouse and Garden Center in Chagrin Falls for many of the plants grown on the property. JFD Landscaping in Bainbridge Township did much of the garden installation.

A focal point in the back yard is a terraced rock garden. The garden separates the patio from an open lawn. Top rocks are partly buried to look like a natural rock outcrop.

"There is an art to stones," O'Neill says. "When these were delivered, I separated them by color and size and placed each one carefully."

Large stones and a black oriental lantern cleverly hide septic tank lids in the rock garden. Black outdoor lighting fixtures resembling upright Asian straw mushrooms provide magical illumination in the garden and along the gravel paths.

Before the garden's transformation, a walkway from the house, through the rock garden and down to the ravine was planned. But by curving the path around the rock garden instead, principles of feng shui were better served. Also, a more aesthetically pleasing scene was created.

"A green garden is a sophisticated design and is not for everyone," O'Neill says. "It also takes more planning."

Undeniably, the Ludwigs enjoy sharing their yard with others. But they also want their children to form family memories. The back yard S'mores Lookout Pointe overlooks the ravine but is away from the meditation sanctuary. Chairs are gathered around a fire pit to roast marshmallows and tell stories. A hammock swings from two giant red oak trees.

"Out here, we hear creatures and see the stars," Mike Ludwig says. "What we don't hear is traffic."

-- Sell is a free-lance writer in Sagamore Hills.

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OUTSIDE Options

Zen gardens offer simple contrasts — yin and yang expressed by shiny and dull plant leaves, sleek and soft surface materials, and soft and bold textures. Landscapes create on varying heights and textures. If executed properly, a Zen garden's nuances are subtle, even imperceptible.

"You feel different when you walk into [the] space," says architect Heidi O'Neill of O'Neill Landscape Design and Installation in Chagrin Falls. She worked with Joe Drake, president of JD Landscapes of Auburn Township, to create the aesthetic Asian garden design for Michael and Donna Ludwig's Moreland Hills home.

"It's understated, but your body and their psyche feels the difference," O'Neill adds. "There's something calming about the composition as a whole."

The interior of the Ludwigs' modern ranch home is arranged with long shui in mind. Carrying the concept beyond the home's interior creates a seamless transition to an outdoor space that the family hadn't previously been using to its full potential. "We have a different type of house that needs something different," says Donna Ludwig.

The L-shaped space includes an entry to the living room and a sliding-glass door to the master bedroom. Beyond the patio area is a 10-foot drop to the lawn. "We had three different spaces, but the landscape never flowed," Donna remembers.

The Ludwigs hired O'Neill to help plan their backyard conversion after viewing her Oriental show garden at the Cleveland Botanical Garden. They knew what they wanted — for one, a patio with the transitional effect of an infinity pool.

"Rather than bordering it with stone walls, we built over the top of the wall, so you don't see an edge and it looks like the patio is floating out there," says Joe Drake, who also designed a railing in the hot tub area so it would not obstruct the family's valley view.

In keeping with the Zen rules of construction, the patio area was finished with pure bluestone, and the deck is Pau Lopez, a rich-colored South American hardwood that only requires a coat of oil for finish.

"When you have a shade garden, you often have problems with moss and slippery materials," O'Neill says. Dense bluestone will not absorb water like sandstone will, and Pau Lopez is solid, unlike other

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Outside Options

Four homeowners show off their backyard conversions, and the landscape designers behind them share how you too can convert outdoor spaces into a peaceful getaway, entertainment hotspot or barbecue central.

Kristen Hampshire



O'Neill Landscape Design and Installation

O'Neill of O'Neill Landscape Design and Installation in Chagrin Falls. She worked with Joe Drake, president of JFD Landscapes of Auburn Township, to create the authentic Asian garden design for Michael and Donna Ludwig's Moreland Hills backyard.

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"When you have a shade garden, you often have problems with moss and slippery materials," O'Neill says. Dense bluestone will not absorb water like sandstone will, and Pau Lope is solid, unlike other, porous woods that allow moisture to seep in and invite moss growth.

Plant selections catered to the Ludwigs' no-fuss approach to gardening. O'Neill focused on maintaining the integrity of their Zen theme, opting for selections with slick and dull leaves. Hydrangea Izu No Hana produces blue flowers, but its selling points are shiny leaves and a tropical look. Contrasting these blooming pom-poms are ostrich ferns. Plum pudding coral bell shows off maroon-colored leaves, O'Neill explains. "Then, of course, I threw in some evergreens."

But mature trees, a stone slope and tight access to the backyard presented challenges for O'Neill, as she designed, and Drake, as his crew installed the hardscape and plants. The Ludwigs faced a tough choice: keep more trees or expand their backyard dining area.

"There was a lot of conversation about what trees should come down," O'Neill recalls. In the end, they eliminated just one. O'Neill also addressed an eyesore that interrupted the serene vibe by artfully camouflaging the home's two septic tank lids with plants and art.

A hot tub that the Ludwigs had previously installed needed to be repositioned by the bedroom sliding-glass door and sunk into the deck to hide its edge, which did not blend with the dark wood and smooth feel of the patio and deck areas. "If you want to use it in the winter, it should be a few steps from your door," O'Neill says.

Finally, furniture plays an important role in pulling off the outdoor living room feel the Ludwigs desired. The couple was inspired by pieces they saw in Miami's South Beach. "We didn't want your typical round table and big cushions," Ludwig says. "We wanted something simple and sleek."

Most of the artwork was purchased at Pier 1 Imports, including pillar candles and a Buddha statue. During the Ludwigs' recent trip to Thailand, they brought back four red pillows. These will serve as seats surrounding a rug "table" to fill a corner spot.

"Our backyard is a place where we can be together as a family and be outside as much as we can," Donna Ludwig says. "Now, we feel like our house is complete."

Expert Advice: A Personal Touch

Infusing personality into a design helps transform an outdoor space into a true extension of the home. "We wanted a place where we could eat dinner every night and entertain," says Donna Ludwig. She and her husband, Michael, worked with Heidi O'Neill to create a landscape plan that reflected their Asian travel experiences.

1. Collect ideas. Whether you gather ideas from vacations or magazines, come to the table with a prioritized list of features you want to include in your design. "A lot of times, people can't express what they are looking for in words, so it helps when they start to see a picture form," O'Neill says.

2. Think function. How will you use the space? If you plan to dine and cook outdoors, be sure this area is close to a kitchen access door. "You have to look at your landscape project as another room off of your house," O'Neill says.

3. Invest wisely. "If you do a well-designed landscape that is installed and maintained properly, you will get your money back for that job," says Joe Drake, president of JFD Landscapes in Auburn Township.

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