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Staff Reporter

Traveling down Rte. 41 from the Wisconsin border towards Gurnee, there is a patch of beauty among the otherwise normal roadside sites.

The resounding greens and other natural colors of Van Zelst Inc. are a testament to the company's 25 years of landscape architecture.

This year, the Wadsworth-based company saw some recognition for the work they have done.

Van Zelst received four Environmental Improvement Awards for its landscape design and construction. The awards were presented by the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA).

David Van Zelst, president and landscape architect with the company, said the entries were assessed by a multi-state panel of judges. The judges looked at the aesthetics and other technical aspects of the projects to come up with the winners.

All of the award-winning projects involved unique and expansive designs. But one in particular exhibited both the beauty and practicality that can be put into a garden.

This project, a garden installed at the Chicago Botanic Garden in

Glencoe, earned Van Zelst the ALCA's Merit Award. The landscapers installed the Buehler Enabling Garden, a design created to give everybody the chance to experience the joys of gardening.

"The enabling garden is meant to demonstrate that gardening can be done by people of all ages and limitations," Van Zelst said.

The garden features new ideas in gardening, such as raised beds, beds on pulleys, vertical gardens and hanging baskets. Designed for people in wheel chairs or with disabilities that do not allow them to keel or bend over, the enabling garden allows everyone to garden without causing any additional discomfort.

The flowers and plants put into the garden were specifically selected to be attractive to all five of the senses. Brightly colored flowers are planted near "fuzzy" plants that appeal to the sense of touch and fragrant flowers that attract the sense of smell. The sensory experience created by the variety of plants in the garden and the way the garden is set up allow nearly everyone to enjoy the physical and emotional benefits of gardening.

In the installation phase, the landscapers wanted to convey the

impression that the garden had been there for a long time.

"The overall intent was to make this garden appear instantly mature, as if it had been there for five years or more," Van Zelst said. "So, we contracted with nurseries throughout the country to grow the specific plant material to a size that would be ready at the time of installation.

For its design of a residential property in Barrington, Van Zelst, Inc. won the ALCA's prestigious Grand Award. The strategic placement of the plantings on a 15 acre property provides a perfect setting for the owners to enjoy beautiful long vistas and pursue their interests in nature and gardening.

In the design, the landscape architects included a variety of over 50,000 native perennial plants, large deciduous and evergreen trees replaced eight acres of non-native buckthorns. The landscapers also naturalized 38,000 bulbs including spring flowering daffodils and narcissus throughout the newly opened space. New bark and stone paths were also installed.

Plants and trees were selected to surround the home with constantly changing three-season landscape color and four season diversity.

Other awards were bestowed upon the company for their work on a Glenview residence and an older home in Evanston.

To come up with the designs for the projects, Van Zelst said his company meets with the client to gather ideas. Then, they come back with detailed designs for the property.

Once the project begins, it could take the company anywhere from one day to a whole season to complete it, depending on the size of the project, Van Zelst said.

"The firm's landscape architects enjoy working with both private and institutional clients who have special needs, whether it is for a vista, nature walks, growing of plants, attraction for wildlife or general enjoyment of a unique landscape," the company president said. "As a design/build firm, Van Zelst Inc. undertakes landscaping projects from the first conceptual sketches through the full construction process and then year round maintenance.

Van Zelst began his career in landscaping after earning a degree in architecture.

"I found out that I enjoyed the outdoors to much to spend my life behind a desk," he said. "This gave me the best of both worlds."