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LANDSCAPING LANGUAGE

BY DENNIS RODKIN

A client sat down recently with her landscape architect, and said she wanted a white garden. Ah, lovely: a white garden! Stylish and elegant, with none of those show-off hot reds and sizzling oranges. Just sedate

white flowers. A calming haven where one might sit on a summer evening with a friend as the darkness gathers.

All white, the client said; nothing that blooms in any color but white. It's a fine scheme for

a home landscape—particularly one that will be used mostly in the evening—and Frank Mariani, head of the Lake Bluff-based landscape architecture firm Mariani Landscape, was grateful that the client had arrived with a def-

inite idea of what she wanted. Then he asked her to play a little game with him. From the extensive garden library in his firm's offices, Frank pulled out a book on Sissinghurst, the English home and extensive gardens of Gertrude Jekyll, the mother of so many notions of garden style. "I opened the book to a photo of Jekyll's famous white garden and she said, 'Yeah, that's a spectacular white garden!'" Frank says. "Then I closed the book and said, 'Did you notice all the colors of the flowers?' There were greens and blues and whites. It's basically white, but it's not just white, white, white."

Strictly limiting the garden to flowers that bloom only white would be too narrow, Frank explained to the client. Introducing other subdued colors—pale greens and blues, even a very light pink here and there—keeps a white garden from being monotonous and allows the designer to install elements that contrast with one another nicely. "If it's not purely white, you open up the palette you can use tenfold," Frank says.

He had not steamrolled over the client's initial idea; he had used professional expertise to expand on it. That's what happens when homeowners know how to talk to a landscape designer. "She did me a favor by saying what she wanted, and then I did her a service by saying, 'I think this is what you're looking for,'" Frank



Photography courtesy of Van Zelst, Inc. Photos by Linda Oyama Bryon.

When the owners of this waterfront home in Glenview called in landscape designer Dave Van Zelst, they said they wanted an expansive deck across the back to maximize their enjoyment of the lake. Van Zelst detected that having a deck right outside the living room would clutter the view from inside with railings and posts, so he proposed a very attractive alternative: Put the deck on the side of the house, where it would still capture great views of the water, but site a gracious ground-level patio outside the living room. It doesn't intrude on the view, and it creates a cozy outdoor space separate from the deck.

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A T O G I C P O I N T

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says. "It was give-and-take."

Embarking on a major landscape project is a bit like eating in an ethnic restaurant where everybody speaks a language you don't. Try to describe what you want, and the results might turn out comically different from what you hoped for. Now, for a single dinner to go wrong isn't so bad, but if you're paying thousands of dollars for a home landscape you'll have to live with for years to come, you don't want the waiter bringing soap when you ordered soup.

"What one person describes as an English cottage garden, another one might call a weed patch," Frank says. "I really need to know what you want." That doesn't mean you need to hand a landscape designer a complete list of plants the landscape must include or specify the size and materials of the patio. Instead, you should arrive ready with what Dave Van Zelst, head of the Wadsworth landscape firm Van Zelst, Inc., calls "some

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basic feelings about what you like and don't like."

Some clients intuit that they ought to go about envisioning their new landscape the same way they would the redesign of the home's interior. They start by clipping pictures they like from garden magazines and books and maybe tour some public gardens or go on a garden walk and bring back photos. They may also note what they like in their own neighborhood. Both Dave and Frank say they are delighted when clients start the process armed with a batch of clippings and ideas. "It's the start of developing a vision together," Dave says.

Clients who aren't that far along often give the designer leads without even knowing it. Walking into your home for a first meeting, Dave says, "we can quite often tell a lot by looking at how your home is furnished. Is it very traditional or formal or contemporary? So even when clients aren't saying something, they are."

The second thing to have in mind at a first meeting is how much you hope to spend and when. Big jobs inevitably cost more than you'd like; are you prepared to spend a lot? Many landscape experts recommend spending between 5 and 10 percent of the value of the house on landscaping. Dave recommends that clients who have a massive reworking of a large lot in mind should think about having the job done in successive portions over the course of a few years, spreading out the cost. If so, consider your priorities. Is it more important that you get the front,



Because it slopes steeply, the space between the rear of the house and the lake was useless to the homeowners as lawn or garden. Yet much of the home is positioned with views out over the slope. On their own, they could not figure out how to improve it. Van Zelt started by placing boulders at the water's edge to help control erosion, and from there added bountifully colorful perennials, creating a kind of color bridge between house and water.

public face of your property done first, or are you itching to get that big party-sized patio under the trees out back ready for the next 4th of July barbecue?

No matter whether you start out with some direction of your own, the designer will have a slew of questions designed to get at what you require, and what you dream of, in your yard. Much of it has little to do with aesthetics, but lots to do with structural concerns. "We want to know how you'll use the space," Dave says. "Do you entertain a lot and need a large patio and deck space? Do you want a swimming pool and spa? Do you have a sunny lot but want a structure to provide shade?" Other considerations include whether any family members or frequent guests have disabilities, whether pets will roam the yard or be confined to dog runs, whether the homeowner wants to include a productive fruit or vegetable garden,

and whether the clients live in the home year-round or only part-time. (People who winter in a warm place, for example, won't need much evergreen material or other winter-interest touches.)

Those settled, it's on to the aesthetics. That's where pictures and clippings come in. When possible, Frank likes to take clients on tours of local gardens and determine what lights them up and what leaves them cold. He may line up visits to residential landscapes that his firm designed and that seem to line up with what the new client wants, or he may schedule a visit to a theme garden, such as Anderson Gardens, the breathtaking Japanese landscape in Rockford, or the English Walled Garden at the Chicago Botanic Garden.

On these trips, as well as when looking at photos with a client, Frank is on the lookout for "the fireworks, the oohs and

aahs that tell me this is the stuff you really like." Not everything he shows his clients is on their want list. He's trying to expand their horizons a bit, get them comfortable with plant choices, styles or paving materials with which they might not be familiar but that he believes will fit in with the composition he's crafting for their yard. "And if the client has said, 'I don't like evergreens,' I might take them to a beautiful formal hedge and they go crazy," he says. "They meant the conical Christmas tree types, but if I had heard them and taken all evergreens off the list, I'd be losing all the options for boxwoods and yews. A terrific mistake."

Once the designer feels comfortably in tune with the client's needs and wants, a plan gets drawn up. Often that step is a doozy, Dave says. The designer is trying to take all the client's input and create a new, unique landscape that meets them all. It can be done and is done all the time by talented designers, but Dave emphasizes that it isn't always perfect the first time. "Often we are able to hit it on the nose the first time, but sometimes we don't and we have to go through several iterations until it's exactly what you want."

Rest assured that designers know that's part of the drill; they don't expect you to love the first draft. It's a working document, ready to be tweaked. "Our theory is we have a lot of expertise, but it's the client's home, so we had better get it to a point that they'll really love it."

Nothing should be lost in translation. **46**