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# Chicagoland GARDENING

MARCH / APRIL  
2004

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# Something from Nothing

A SHALLOW, SLOPED BACKYARD THAT TUMBLED TOO QUICKLY TOWARD  
A RETENTION POND GETS SHORED UP.

STORY BY CATHY JEAN MALONEY PHOTOS BY LINDA OYAMA BRYAN



**W**ith their busy lives, Alok and Amita Sharma don't live on the proverbial "golden pond," but, according to Amita, they wanted their water's edge garden to have

"color, color and more color!" Their home, one of 15 or so surrounding a suburban 3-acre retention pond, had only a little wooden backyard deck—hardly an inviting view from inside or out.





Landscaping around suburban retention ponds can be fairly predictable and, well, boring. Bland turf typically covers a steep dropoff to a man-made pond. Sometimes a small fountain sends a feeble spray in the middle of the pond—hardly enough to cause a ripple of excitement among garden lovers.

The Sharmas called on landscape architect David Van Zelst, owner of Van Zelst, Inc. in Wadsworth, to stir things up a bit. “We had always wanted a nice garden but were thinking about the front yard,” Amita confides. Then they realized that their master bedroom, living room, family room and kitchen all look out on the pond. To maximize those views, it made sense to work on the backyard first.

“The goal was to design a space for small scale entertaining and also to create terrific views for all those rooms,” Van Zelst says. The Sharmas also wanted to make sure that their neighbors would be able to enjoy the views to the garden as well.

The site posed challenges. Although the total property is generously sized, the backyard is extremely narrow—only about 18 feet separates the deck from the water’s edge. Most of those 18 feet are on a steep incline down to the pond.

Van Zelst notes that the shoreline was also threatened by erosion. “One of the first things we did was put in a boulder retaining wall,” he says. Gun-metal granite boulders were sited along the shoreline and then planted with ground-hugging plants such as euonymus (*E. fortunei* ‘Coloratus’) and plants with long taproots like



Whether looking up, down or around, the Sharmas enjoy a colorful garden planted with perennials and shrubs.



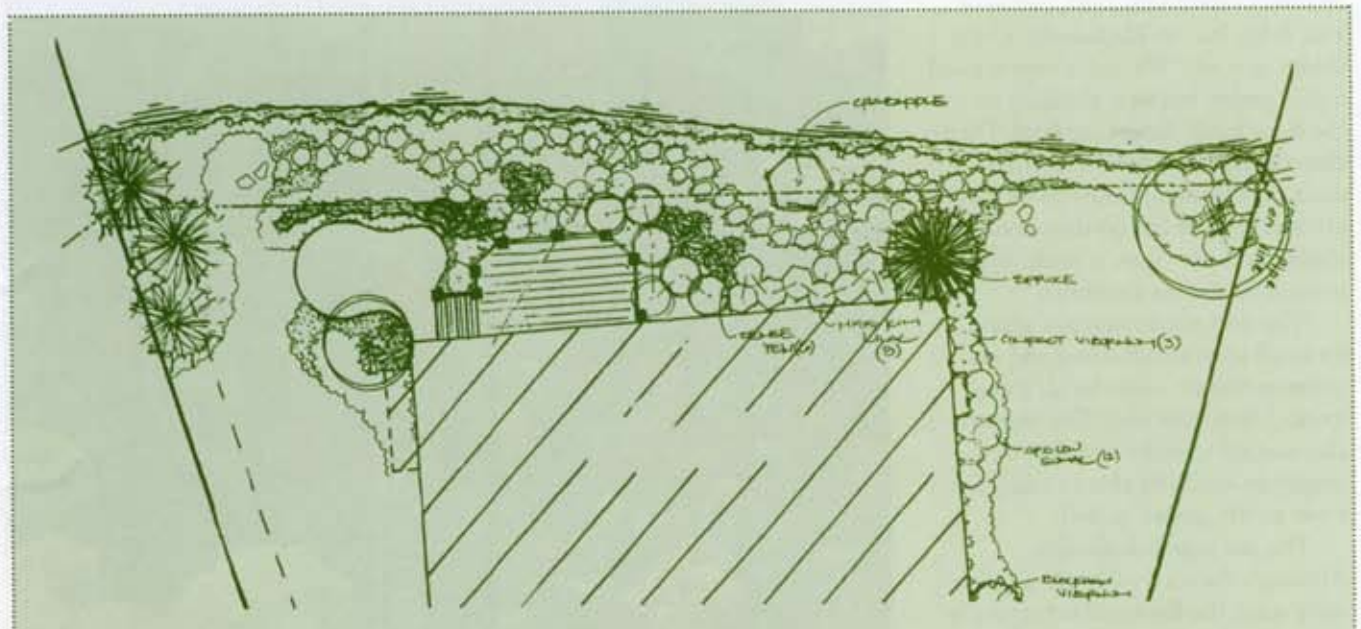
coneflowers (*Echinacea purpurea* 'Magnus') to prevent erosion and create a naturalistic effect.

With the shore stabilized, Van Zelst collaborated with the Sharmas to identify their needs for outdoor rooms. The original 6- by 8-foot deck was unusable for entertaining. A new 12- by 12-foot cedar deck was built, with painted white railings to complement the home. "We had to be careful in designing the height of that railing," Van Zelst remembers. "It couldn't interfere with the sightlines of the garden from within the house."

A new bluestone patio on the side of the yard offers another space to enjoy the garden. Amita says she enjoys both areas for entertaining or quiet reflection. "It's very romantic in the evening to watch the sunset." The Sharmas also savor their morning tea on the deck in the summer.



The deck affords easy access to the bluestone patio, surrounded by flowers throughout the growing season.



## Plant List for the Garden

*Fraxinus americana* 'Autumn Purple'  
*Amelanchier grandiflora*  
*Magnolia stellata*  
*Syringa patula* 'Miss Kim'  
*Taxus x media* 'Densiformis'  
*Rhus aromatica* 'Gro-low'  
*Euonymus fortunei* 'Coccineus'

*Salvia x superba* 'May Night'  
*Sedum* 'Autumn Joy'  
*Coreopsis verticillata* 'Moonbeam'  
*Rudbeckia fulgida* 'Goldsturm'  
*Liatris spicata* 'Kobold'  
*Heuchera* 'Palace Purple'  
*Hemerocallis* 'Chicago Peach'

*Hemerocallis* 'Stella de Oro'  
*Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle'  
*Perovskia atriplicifolia* 'Longin'  
*Echinacea purpurea* 'Magnus'  
*Thymus praecox* 'Coccineus'



## chicago by design

A casual bluestone path connects the two entertaining spaces, and meanders from the deck to the shoreline below. "We wanted to walk in the garden, not just look at it," Amita explains. She especially likes the thyme planted between the stepping stones. Its fragrance enhances a casual stroll, and its purple blossoms add a joyful note in summer.

Van Zelst amended the soil significantly before planting—both to help with erosion concerns and to help establish the plants. "We used a custom blend of leaf, peat and mushroom compost," he explains. The plant palette was chosen to provide continuous color from spring's daffodils to 'Autumn Joy' sedum in fall. "That's what's so exciting about this garden," Amita says. "There's always something blooming."

The bright, sunny conditions are perfect for the garden's daylilies, Russian sage, salvia and coneflowers. With afternoon shade, the versatile 'Annabelle' hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle') provides structure and eye-catching, long-lasting white blooms. Massed plantings of lilacs (*Syringa patula* 'Miss Kim') near the house offer spring color, while groupings of evergreens (*Taxus x media* 'Densiformis') provide variety in form and winter interest.

The Sharmas did not want a lot of trees which could block the view and limit the sun-loving plant possibilities. But a strategically-placed spruce tree at the corner of the house offers privacy and adds height to the garden.

The garden is fairly low maintenance, with a sprinkler system handling most watering requirements, and reliable perennials offering dependable color each year. Some planting beds flanking the bluestone patio are earmarked for annuals and a rose garden, which allow the Sharmas to introduce different varieties each year, should they so desire.

This is a lot of garden packed into an oft-ignored space. Amita calls it a "miniaturist garden," but it surely packs a big wallop. ♣

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PHOTO: ARIE COHEN

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This garden began as a focal point to admire from the window and curb.  
*by Patrice Peltier*



PHOTO: MARY GARDNER

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