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Flowers and Forms

What does the word "contemporary" mean when it's applied to gardens? This project offers one interpretation.

Story By Carolyn Ulrich Photography By Linda Oyama Bryan



The geometric design of the house is reflected in the layout of both hardscape and planting beds.

We typically think of a garden as a collection of flowers, but it's also possible to consider it as an arrangement of shapes. Squares and circles. Ovals and rectangles. Curves and straight lines. All of them tempered by the interplay of light and shadow as well as textures (rough and smooth). Designers who think like this sit down at their desks and sketch out shapes, and only after those are in place do they start filling in the details with specific plants.

To be sure, there are flowers aplenty in this garden designed for North Shore clients by David Van Zelst, owner of Van Zelst, Inc. in Wadsworth, but it's intriguing to regard it also as a series of forms, almost as if it were an abstract painting come to life. This way of thinking seems particularly appropriate when looking at the garden area adjacent to the rear of this contemporary house.

The property, which abuts the Des Plaines River, is expansive, with great sweeps of lawn and mature shade trees on the perimeter. But within this framework, there are three stylistically different components: a rather romantic circular dining area that features an ingenious use of creeping thyme; a grand-scale, naturalistic landscape where sometimes-aggressive perennials have been given free rein to ramble; and, adjacent to the house, the more formal area that intentionally reflects the clean, modern lines of the architecture.

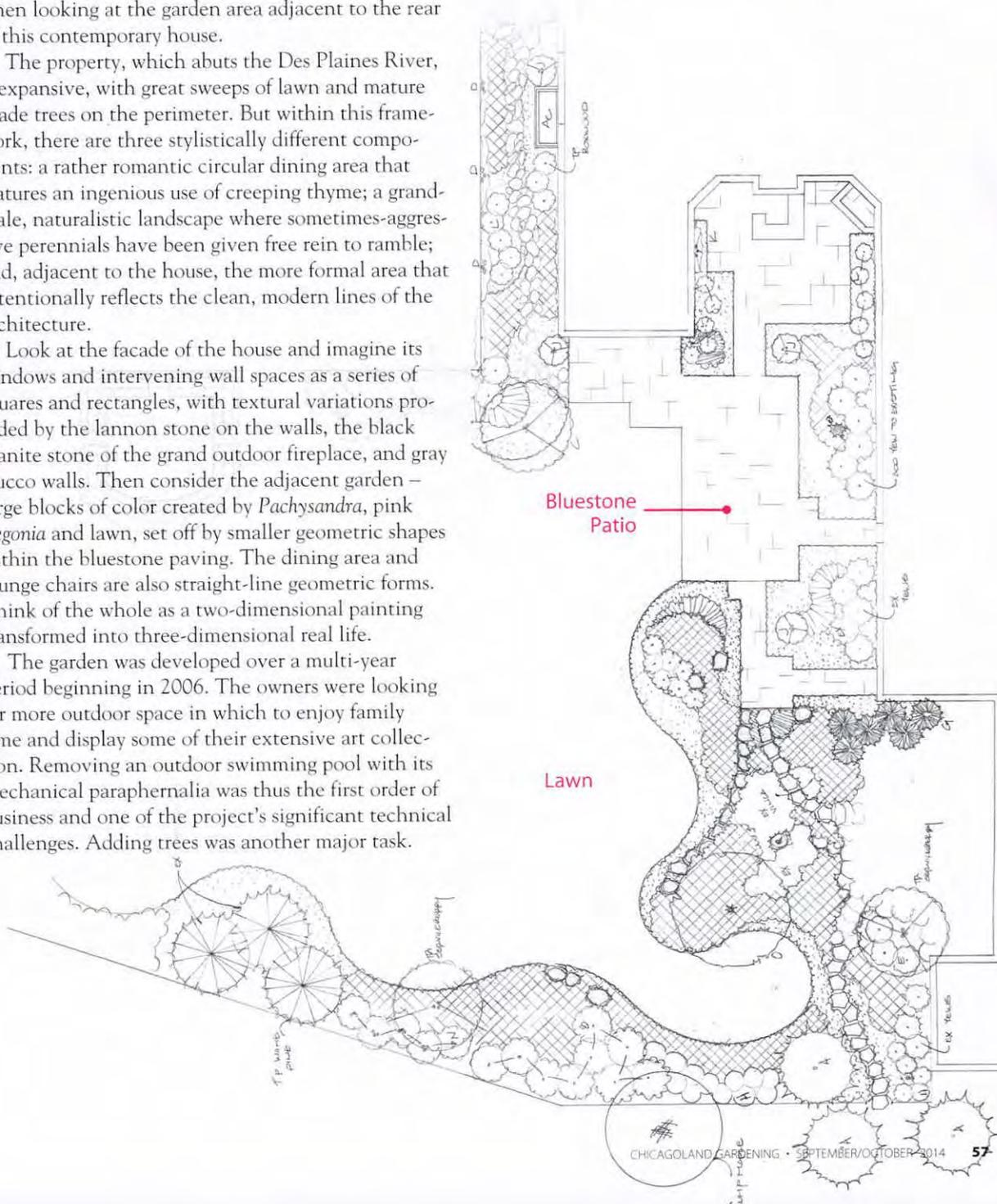
Look at the facade of the house and imagine its windows and intervening wall spaces as a series of squares and rectangles, with textural variations provided by the lannon stone on the walls, the black granite stone of the grand outdoor fireplace, and gray stucco walls. Then consider the adjacent garden — large blocks of color created by *Pachysandra*, pink *Begonia* and lawn, set off by smaller geometric shapes within the bluestone paving. The dining area and lounge chairs are also straight-line geometric forms. Think of the whole as a two-dimensional painting transformed into three-dimensional real life.

The garden was developed over a multi-year period beginning in 2006. The owners were looking for more outdoor space in which to enjoy family time and display some of their extensive art collection. Removing an outdoor swimming pool with its mechanical paraphernalia was thus the first order of business and one of the project's significant technical challenges. Adding trees was another major task.

"There were fantastic oaks and maples already on the property — bur oak, swamp white oak, white oak in particular — so we didn't need to add structure," recalls Van Zelst. "We mainly added ornamentals such as crabapples, redbud, *Cornus mas*, and also some white pine."

The major outlines were then laid out with the formal, contemporary-style garden next to the house, the smaller, circular dining niche around the corner, concluding with the large naturalistic area that leads to the woods on the perimeter and the river.

It was important to Van Zelst that the eye be able to take in the garden as a whole and not just focus on one small spot at a time. Thus the planting beds featured "strong pops of color" and large simple forms







that were repeated throughout. “I wanted it to be organized, yet relaxed, formal but comfortable,” he explains. “The color palette was limited in order to make bold statements.”

Bright pink begonias and rosy *Astilbe* provide the strong pops of color in the small circular dining area, made even more dramatic by the contrasting vibrant greens of pachysandra, boxwood (*Buxus* spp.), yews (*Taxus* spp.) and *Bergenia*. And then the pièce de résistance – a ground-covering carpet of pale creeping thyme. Not all that frequently used, creeping thyme can take light foot traffic, especially the flat-to-the-ground wooly thyme (*Thymus pseudolanuginosus*) used here. It is also a good choice for softening the look of flagstones in walkways.

A curved line of white-flowering ‘Limelight’ hydrangeas (*H. paniculata* ‘Limelight’) leads the eye away from the dining area to an additional hydrangea planting bordering the lawn, thus beginning the transition from a small, discrete space to a larger one. As for the more difficult issue of how he transitioned from formality to informality in this project, Van Zelst gives credit to the plants. Moving from formal to informal was not particularly difficult, he says. “The plants do it for you.”

Informality is the key characteristic of the large lawn area where often-rambunctious plants such as *Monarda* and gooseneck loosestrife (*Lysimachia clethroides*) were set free to strut their stuff. In smaller gardens, both plants can be too much of a good thing and need frequent pulling out, a maintenance chore for which most of us don’t have time. Not here.

Moreover, the red-flowering ‘Cambridge Scarlet’ monarda continues to keep its good looks throughout

the growing season and doesn’t get plagued by the powdery mildew that often turns its leaves unsightly in our humid summers. Perhaps the increased air circulation provided by growing it in a more open space is a key variable.

As for the gooseneck loosestrife, a plant whose arched white flowers really do remind you of a gaggle of geese when you see them massed by the hundreds, they’re growing in a natural area that Van Zelst calls “absolutely ideal.” Even the fact that the land here sometimes floods is not a problem for this perennial.

Planting “by the hundreds” is no hyperbole. Van Zelst’s firm grows all of the plants that it uses in its projects, and for something as expansive as this, it would probably be more correct to speak of planting by the thousands. Determining appropriate scale is another concept that’s crucial to a successful design. It’s important not to be afraid to plant large.

The garden stays colorful through the second hard frost, says Van Zelst, and fortunately suffered very little damage during the past year’s ferocious winter, and that was mostly to some boxwoods.

Avoiding winter kill to individual plants is often just a matter of dumb luck, but achieving a garden that keeps its good looks despite seasonal change is a matter of smart design. With forethought, ingenuity and creative plant choices, David Van Zelst turned this space into a prime demonstration of how strict geometry and naturalistic curves can be combined into a design whole that provides year-round pleasure for clients and visitors alike. 🐦

Editor Carolyn Ulrich has written for *Chicagoland Gardening* since its inception. She is a former weekly garden columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and has received several awards for magazine writing from the Garden Writers Association.

(1.) The “exploded flagstone patio” provides a secluded nook for dining and socializing, then leads **(2.)** to the open naturalistic area **(3.)** with its massive planting of bright red monardas and **(4.)** white gooseneck loosestrife.

