



The Rebirth of a Front Yard

I am not one of those designers who start a project by insisting that all the existing plant material on a site be eliminated. Instead, I take a more practiced approach to design, talking with my clients and assessing their needs before developing a plan. Yet, as I approached my new clients' property, all I could see was a massive yew hedge looming in front of the house. It lorded age before beauty while simultaneously keeping light from reaching the sunporch and preventing anything else from growing in the small front yard. In talking with my clients, I found that although they had grown weary of pruning this hedge to keep it from consuming walkways and walkers, *he* thought the hedge was bold and artful and liked the character and privacy it provided. *She*, however, agreed with me and welcomed the idea of breathing new life into the garden by transforming the shrub into compost.

Although plants are not their strength, the owners know that they like clear, strong design with a minimal focus on color. The African sculpture and vintage photography that grace the inside of their

home illustrate their amplified awareness of the importance of light, shadow, and tone. With its geometry and clean lines, their Prairie-style stucco house also reflects this simple but sophisticated aesthetic. My challenge was to construct a con-

temporary American garden that reflected their tastes and neither ignored nor was a slave to the style of the house. The family has little time to care for the garden, so it also needed to be low-maintenance. When we finally agreed on a design, they admitted that they couldn't quite visualize how the front yard would appear, yet they trusted me to remove the hedge, with the promise of planting another screen to provide privacy from the busy sidewalk and street.

Removing the yew hedge suddenly revealed the house's distinctive features: custom windows, an unusual and inviting off-center entrance-

way, a deep side yard, and the dramatic lines of sun and shade created by the architecture. Once the hedge was gone, my clients' reactions were the opposite of what I had anticipated. He said it looked bare but not as awful as he had thought it would. She said it not only surprised but stunned

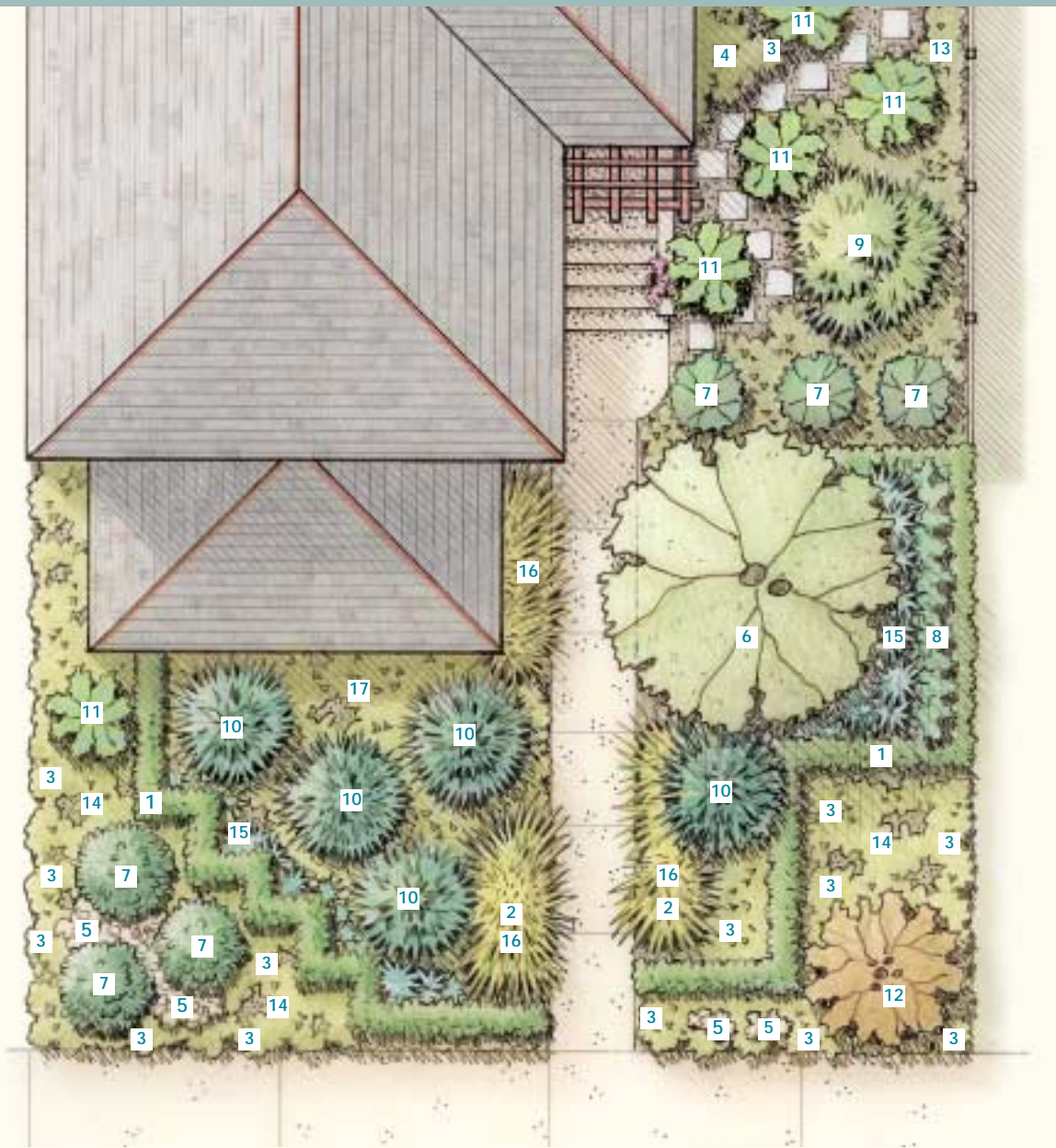


An overgrown hedge is replaced with a design that plays off the geometry of a Prairie-style house

by Julie Siegel

A DESIGN WITH STRONG LINES AND HARD-WORKING PLANTS

Linear plantings echo the architecture of the house and anchor the garden's design. To unify the front yard, plantings on one side of the walkway are repeated on the other side.



The author chose tough plants that would perform well with a minimum of care in this Chicago garden.

BULBS AND PERENNIALS

1. *Bergenia* (*Bergenia cordifolia* 'Rotblum'), USDA Hardiness Zones 3–8
2. Flowering onion (*Allium* 'Purple Sensation'), Z 4–9
3. Large-cupped daffodils (*Narcissus* 'Professor Einstein'), Z 2–9
4. Mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*), Z 4–8
5. Stonecrop (*Sedum album* 'Coral Carpet'), Z 4–9

TREES AND SHRUBS

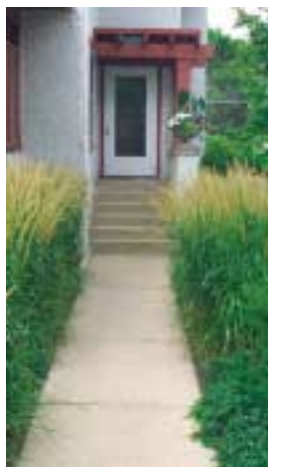
6. Allegheny serviceberry (*Amelanchier laevis* 'Cumulus'), Z 5–9
7. Boxwood (*Buxus* × 'Green Velvet' and 'Green Mountain'), Z 6–9
8. Cranberry cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster apiculatus*), Z 5–7
9. Cutleaf sumac (*Rhus typhina* 'Laciniata'), Z 3–8
10. Hetzii juniper (*Juniperus chinensis* 'Hetzii Columnaris'), Z 3–9
11. Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica* 'Little Henry'), Z 6–9
12. Witch hazel (*Hamamelis* × *intermedia* 'Arnold Promise'), Z 5–9

GROUND COVERS AND GRASSES

13. Barrenwort (*Epimedium* × *rubrum*), Z 4–8
14. Bigroot geranium (*Geranium macrorrhizum* 'Album'), Z 4–8
15. Blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens* 'Saphirsprudel'), Z 4–9
16. Feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis* × *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'), Z 5–9
17. Periwinkle (*Vinca minor* 'Dart's Blue'), Z 4–9



The fine texture of the grasses and a cutleaf sumac play off the strong geometric lines of the house and its paths. A grouping of mountain mint buffers the path from the house, and plantings of barrenwort fill in around the path.



Two lines of feather reed grass emphasize but also soften the straight line of the concrete path to the front door (top). Feather reed grass, blue oat grass, and bigroot geranium are some of the author's favorite low-maintenance perennials (above).

her. Now, a few seasons later, they have both come to like the updated screen much better than the old one.

The new screen, which is made up of four columnar junipers (*Juniperus chinensis* 'Hetzii Columnaris'), extends on a diagonal a few feet out from the porch. Playing off the geometry of the architecture, it stands in better propor-

tion to the size of the house and embodies a rhythm that energizes the design. Instead of blocking out light and motion, as the old hedge did, the new one allows light to roam freely, creating intriguing shadows on the house and in the sunroom. My clients can now look out their windows, but they don't feel totally exposed. I decided to use an evergreen because

it provides a solid backdrop that emphasizes the shapes and colors of the grasses and of the leaves and berries of the other plants in the garden during all four seasons. Ultimately, I chose junipers since they are native and thus match the regional architecture. I also varied the sizes of the junipers to impart a more natural look.

A straight concrete path bisects the front yard like an arrow. Replacing the path was not in my clients' budget, so I needed to come up with some ways to unite the front yard using plants. I started by placing a fifth juniper on the opposite side of the path from the hedge. Then I lined both sides of the path with an upright ornamental grass (*Calamagrostis* × *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster') interplanted with flowering onions (*Allium* 'Purple Sensation'). By emphasizing the path's straight shot, the lines of these plants diminish the visual weight of the concrete as well as mimic the geometry of the house. When they bloom early in the season, the flowering onion's purple globes provide a geometric balance until the grass grows taller.

To unite the two sides of the yard further, I decided to play off the lines of the house even



Plants like bergenia, cotoneaster, boxwood, and serviceberry provide at least two seasons of interest and perform well in the tough midwestern climate.

more and create a zigzagging line of bergenia (*Bergenia cordifolia* 'Rotblum') that winds its way across both sides of the yard and mimics the stepping stone path that leads to the backyard. Finally, I used grasses and other tough plants like stonecrop (*Sedum album* 'Coral Carpet'), bigroot geranium (*Geranium macrorrhizum* 'Album'), epimedium (*Epimedium* × *rubrum*), and mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*) to provide a textural counterpoint to the structure of the junipers and the other woody plants like boxwood (*Buxus* spp. and cvs.), cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster apiculatus*), Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica* 'Little Henry'), and cutleaf sumac (*Rhus typhina* 'Laciniata'). With the exception of the one 'Arnold Promise' witch hazel (*Hamamelis* × *intermedia* 'Arnold Promise'), none of the plants used here were expensive.

Even though the plants are low-maintenance, this garden, like most, does need some care. It needed watering, mulching, and weeding when it was first established. Now, however, the plants are beginning to cover the ground and win out over most of the weeds. Since recent years have been dry, I recommend occasional watering.

Most of the maintenance work in this garden happens in the spring. I suggested that the clients leave the perennials untouched throughout the winter for some visual interest. In early March, the perennials and the grasses are cut back and soon afterwards the winter damage on the evergreens is pruned out and the suckers cut off the sumac. The bergenia can be dead-headed after they finish blooming and the allium seed heads can be removed, but neither of these chores is mandatory. By summer, the daffodil foliage is covered by the mountain mint, grasses, and other perennials, all of which will need to be divided every few years.

Ideally, my clients gain not just time from this easy-care landscape but also the enjoyment of seeing light, shadow, and tone at play, reflecting in their garden the principles they appreciate inside their home. ∞



DESIGN TIP

Place a witch hazel against an evergreen tree or shrub with a strong form to keep the garden interesting in winter.

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