

AMAZING SPACES

Delightful Garden Leads to Career Change

BY NICOLE SPIRIDAKIS

Julie Olson's backyard garden is abloom and abuzz—lush flowers spill over a carefully built brick wall, benches and wind chimes are placed just so, a birdbath tempts winged passersby, bees swirl in and out of lusty Echinacea petals. There is even a benevolent spirit in the form of a politely tail-wagging dog.

But just four years ago, this oasis of tranquility on Capitol Hill was hardly even a blossom in its owner's eye. Then, the rains came. "It was a particularly bad winter," Olson, a North Dakota native, remembers. "And the backyard is on a slope, so all the water poured down into the house."

She realized the simple expanse of dirt and grass that had served as a backyard for the last three years just wasn't going to cut it anymore. Her vague ideas and hopes of "one day" beginning to landscape were not enough anymore. "One day" had arrived.

After the piles of dirt and debris were hauled away, after the plastic lawn chairs had been packed up, Olson began to design her garden—an effort that would sprout not only into a place friends and neighbors compliment with a touch of envy, but to a new career path.

A Natural Approach

Gravity's pull on the earth has long been a source of frustration for farmers and gardeners alike not lucky enough to find themselves in flat plains or valleys. From the rocky

hillsides of Scotland's islands to South America's mountains, terracing in one form or another is a technique used to slow the process of erosion. It is thus in Olson's garden.

Brick steps lead gently uphill to a small patio, also made from brick, where two chairs rest in the shade of a tall wooden trellis. A vine makes its way slowly up the structure, twirling and twining around iron stars hanging high overhead. Flowers and plants of all sizes firmly anchor the earth, allowing for little movement even in times of heavy rainfall. All the plants are perennials, and many are the originals that were planted four years ago, Olson says. The garden is a "shade garden," because it receives less than six hours of full sun a day.

Olson chose the plants to best utilize the average daily amount of sun, and says she relies mostly on the spring and summer rains to nourish them, though she will water if needed.

"Most people think this is a high maintenance garden because of all the plants," she laughs, "It looks high maintenance but in fact, it's not."

She doesn't have too much of a problem with insects—and prefers to not use pesticides—though mosquitoes make their frequent appearance in summer, and butterflies and bees are welcome.

The basic transformation from dirt pile to greenery took about a month,

Olson recalls. She designed the space and hired a contractor to do

most of the initial work, although she and a friend built the upper patio. Since that first year she hasn't had to put in many new plants, although, she says, she moves plants around within the garden to "play" with their placement.

Ferns, Echinacea, honeysuckle and peonies are a just a few of her flowers often enjoyed by the neighborhood's dragonflies and birds—not to mention the occasional nocturnal visitor.

"I've seen a raccoon once or twice, and the dog was scared by a possum," she laughs, "She doesn't like to go in the garden at night because she doesn't know what she'll find out there."

When Olson moved into her house, the front yard as well as the back needed a major renovation.

"The man who lived here before me wanted to make the house a showcase," she says, gesturing to the unusual white marble floors that her dog Butterscotch nonetheless appears to enjoy on this warm July day. "So he cemented the yard to make it into a driveway, and put up a weird fence."

Alas, he could not obtain a permit to make the area into a true driveway, Olson says; when she bought the house she acquired a front yard not full of blooms, but of pavement. For a few years she tended her plants and flowers in pots and planters, but encountered an occasional problem with theft. Finally, she decided to redo the entire space.

Six hours of breaking up the

cement and a three-day weekend later, the front of the house was transformed from a cluttered sidewalk framed by an unsightly iron gate into two flourishing flowerbeds lining a walkway. As in the backyard garden, Olson carefully chose perennial plants that needed minimal care and watering. A gargoyle keeps steadfast watch over a little bench surrounded by riotous greenery, though Olson says the existence of theft has greatly declined after the Results gym moved in across the street.

Landscaping as a New Career

Growing up as part of a farming family in North Dakota, Olson did not think much about having a garden when she moved and set up residence in Washington. Still, though she lived in apartments she often kept flowers and plants on her balconies.

In two weeks, she will leave her job as a graphic designer at the Department of Agriculture—where she has worked for 14 years—to devote herself full time to her garden design business, Serendipity Garden Designs.

"In a way, it's as though I've come full circle," she says.

In addition to designing her own garden, Olson has also designed and worked on spaces in Chevy Chase, Md., and Arlington, Va. She has completed two and one-half years of a graduate certificate program in landscape design at George Washington University; she has a year and one-half left in the program.

What seemed like a disaster in the making when her backyard was flooded has instead resulted in a door opening.

"My friends kept saying the garden was so great, and I was really interested in it," Olson says. "I think I have found my true calling in life, my passion."

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Olsen's front yard space before (left) and after.