

# How Does Your Garden Grow?

## Serendipity Garden Design Brings Green and a Touch of the Unexpected to Capitol Hill

BY JOSHUA GRAY



Julie Olson

*I never had any other desire so strong, and so like to covetousness, as that one which I have had always, that I might be master at last of a small house and a large Garden.*

—Abraham Cowley, *The Garden*, 1666

The urban garden holds many delights. An oasis of cool during DC's relentless summers, offering respite on a July dog-day. A green and peaceful hour with the Sunday paper and a cup of coffee. A landscape to dream about while trapped behind a desk. And for many, the pleasure of cool earth in their hands and a few outdoor hours stolen from hectic schedules.

When Julie Olson bought her Capitol Hill house seven years ago, she didn't know that what appeared to be a simple gardening project would lead to a career change. The 1,700-square foot row house had an

enormous back yard, but poor grading meant work that she hadn't anticipated.

"When I bought the house I had a drainage problem...so since I lived at the bottom of a hill, I had to re-do the yard, regrade it and terrace it...so that, with all the planting, got rid of the drainage problem...Once the terraces were in, I had all this land...so I started planting, and I started researching plants for shade, and I started playing around with it."

Olson had some prior gardening experience in her previous, rented house, but it took buying her own home before she realized the depth of her interest.

"Developing this back yard got me

into it, and then I found a program at GW university in landscape design, a certificate program, and I've been going there ever since—it's been about four years now."

So, on July 30th, 2004, her 40th birthday—and the 14th anniversary of her initial employment—Julie Olson left her job as a graphic designer with the Department of Agriculture, and struck out on her own, under the name Serendipity Garden Design.

"I didn't know four or five years ago that this was going to be a career path for me, but I decided I was tired of working for the federal government, and it just seemed like a natural transition."

Although garden design might seem a far cry from her erstwhile career, her artistic background serves her well. "The design concepts are very similar, color and shape and form play into outdoor design as well as graphic design...My style is very flowing and Romantic, it's full and lush, but I do all sorts of gardens. I do Asian garden design, which is very simple form, and it's very different for me, but its fun to do something different. [But] my signature really is these very flowing, lush, Romantic gardens."

### Gardening on the Hill

Although she's done work in Upper Northwest as well as Arlington, many of her installations have been on the Hill, which presents its own unique challenges.

"We have a lot of shade here on the Hill with all the big trees, so I've really learned shade gardening. I know shade gardening like the back of my hand...[it's] kind of my specialty."

Olson is happy to work with traditional plantings like dogwoods, but she's partial to some more unexpected, exotic selections.

"I favor purple coneflowers, I like purple a lot...I do some strange stuff, like ginger and arums, of course hostas, Lenten roses, lamium maculatum—which is dead nettle—and there's lots of shrubs, oak leaf hydrangeas, hydrangeas in general, nandinas, very shade oriented."

A beautiful garden is, of course, only half of Olson's mission. One of the keys to a successful garden, she feels, is appropriate plant selection. Too often, she finds the wrong plant in the wrong location.

"You learn to put the right plant in the right place...people get slugs on their hostas. I don't get slugs on my hostas, it's in the right environ-



Olson's Garden of Delights

ment... I've learned as I've gone along what plants work in what place. A lot of the calls I'm getting are, 'I buy plants; they die; I don't know if I'm putting them in the right place.' My job has been to learn the plants that work in the right place."

A Midwestern transplant, Olson's broad accent comes through just a bit as she speaks appreciatively about DC's mild climate, which encourages plantings that wouldn't survive her native North Dakota. She evinces a particular fondness for crape myrtle, as well as dwarf hydrangeas, plants which thrive in warm Southern climates. Although her brothers still work the farm on which she grew up, she says she doesn't miss the brutal, interminable Heartland winters.

### Accomplishments in the Community

Although clearly consumed by all things green, Olson's interests don't end in the backyard. A staunch Hill booster, she served as chair of ANC 6B from 2003-2004.

Characteristically modest about her accomplishments, she's nevertheless proud of her work on Reservation 13 planning, as well as her (unsuccessful) opposition to the demolition of an historic property at 19th &

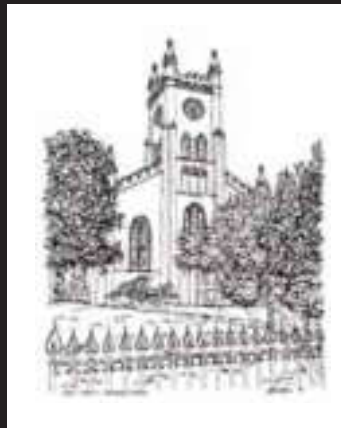
Independence to make way for the St. Coletta's school complex.

More than anything, she points to her legacy of internal organization within 6B, whose paperwork and office were in disarray when she took office. "At least it was organized for the person coming in after me," she chuckles. Having served the maximum two-year term as chair, she's currently active as 6B's Secretary.

A tour of Julie Olson's own backyard, accompanied by her ten-year old Chow-mix Butterscotch, is a study in what makes her gardens work. Although Olson apologizes for some work in progress, as well as a few slightly flattened plantings—Butterscotch's impromptu doggie bed—it's a lovely place, tranquil, soothing and calm. Early May green contrasts with explosions of purple and red, the scent of lavender pervasive.

For an instant, momentary imaginings of Southern France obscure muted traffic rumble, and one is transported away from the Hill, away from the inner city. And a long, long way from a desk job at the Department of Agriculture.

*Hill resident Joshua Gray is a frequent feature contributor to this newspaper.*



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|           |  |
|-----------|--|
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| 9:15 am   | Breakfast  |
| 9:45 am   | Adult Forum - Bible study and discussion of special issues |
| 11:00 am  | Church School  |
| 11:00 am* | Holy Eucharist - music                                     |
| 12:00 pm  | Coffee Hour and Fellowship                                 |

*Nursery care for children under 3 available at 8:15 am*

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# Capitol Hill Community Achievement Awards

dinner honoring FRANCES SLAUGHTER, NANCY METZGER, AND JOHN PARKER



The 2005 Arnold F. Keller, Jr., Award of \$10,000 was presented to Michelle Pierre, Principal of the John Tyler Elementary School. This 22nd Annual dinner raised over \$70,000 to support Capitol Hill community projects in education, recreation, arts, social services, and environmental enhancement.

From the left: Stephanie Deutsch, Nancy Metzger, Michelle Pierre, Frances Slaughter, John Parker, Nicky Cymant

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