

Small delights

Two urban gardens prove planning, not size, is the key to outdoor perfection.

BY CHARLES ENMAN

Sitting in the backyard of their Glebe townhouse, Trent and Judith Reid exude all the ease that comes with the perfect late summer afternoon.

"It's another room for us," Judith says, looking around their garden. "We call it 'our little postage stamp,' but it's a big part of our lives."

Trent nods. "Yes, our little garden's a real bonus. It's really our summer living room. We can be out here quite comfortably till late in the evening with a few friends and a few drinks."

Nothing garden-variety about this small urban slice of green. Designed by landscape architect John Szczepaniak, it creates maximum beauty and utility in a minimal space, only 15 by 25 feet.

"The space is tiny," says Szczepaniak. "But that doesn't mean a good landscape architect can't satisfy the client's wish list—in this case, for the feeling that the garden extends their living space outdoors, that the space feels as large as possible, and that the arrangement gives them the privacy everyone wants."

Over on Linden Terrace, Szczepaniak, working with more space, has created a garden featuring a spa that doubles as a fountain for John and Christine Pugh. "To us, it's an oasis," Christine Pugh says.

Ottawans who live in the urban core are increasingly seeking luxury in their gardens.

"Now, you have to deliver something out of the ordinary,"



JEAN LEVAC, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

"We call it 'our little postage stamp,' but it's a big part of our lives," Judith Reid says of her 15-by-25-foot backyard in the Glebe.

the landscape architect says.

"The garden must truly be a place to relax, so it has to be arranged with harmony and simplicity. You want a sense of refuge.

"There are lots of ways to help the magic happen," he says.

When Szczepaniak met the Reids in 1999, they were empty-nesters newly arrived from a large property in Barrhaven. They'd had a large perennial garden for decades and wanted a sense of seclusion, hidden from their townhome neighbours.

The Reids enter their outdoor cocoon by stepping out of their living room onto a teak deck. They sit in comfortable teak chairs, a good spot for listening to their indoor stereo.

From this vantage point, the garden seems intimate yet surprisingly spacious, considering its dimensions. The cobblestones are laid out in a triangular

pattern, a design that pulls the eye from corner to corner magnifying the apparent space.

The garden plants are mostly green, presenting a uniform colour field that holds together well and avoids a busy feel. Junipers and miniature Japanese birch give a slight exotic sense. At the back, for accents, white Cosmos flowers in bloom. "It's a lovely effect," Judith says. "Almost Japanese."

"The pergola is what really gives privacy, both for us and for our backyard neighbour," Trent says. "This is our favourite place to sit and talk."

To ensure the garden can be used after sunset, Szczepaniak convinced the Reids to install small cone-shaped lights on posts around the garden. They point downward, so provide soft illumination.

"You can't quite read at midnight, but you can have wonder-

ful gatherings out here long after the sun is down," Trent says.

The garden is very low-maintenance, he adds. "Sure, we pull the odd weed, but apart from that, we just enjoy it. We don't even own a lawn-mower."

Four years ago, the Pughs had a larger backyard that somehow just didn't work.

"Everything was compartmentalized, split up," Christine Pugh recalls. "When we had guests, they'd just stand on our deck, instead of moving out into the yard. Things felt claustrophobic."

The laneway extended to the back of the property, eating up the space.

"What we wanted was a courtyard kind of feel, a large space where guests would feel invited to move around," Christine says.

The Pughs' wish list included two further items—a spa, for

year-round outdoor bathing, and a shed for storing garden furniture and tools over the winter.

For Szczepaniak, the courtyard effect was an easy reach. The laneway is gone and most of the ground is covered with paving stones, showing circular patterns here and there, reminding the landscape architect of the Alhambra, the Moorish castle in the Spanish city of Granada.

A courtyard needs a fountain, and to this end the spa does double duty. Triple duty, really, because it's a great place for guests to sit.

"The spa's really efficient," Szczepaniak says. "In a small space, you want to get as many uses as you can out of everything." With flowers growing up its side, the shed, without looking utilitarian, serves its purpose well. "It really looks like it belongs to the house," Christine Pugh says.



The spa in John and Christine Pugh's garden does double duty as a courtyard fountain with a pergola providing privacy from the neighbours.

A pergola now perches on the deck, giving privacy from the neighbours.

"For me, the pergola gives a European effect, which I love," Judith Reid says.

So how has it worked? "Wonderfully," Christine Pugh says. "People now feel they can move out freely. The whole backyard is usable."

Calling on professional help may not be for everyone. And Szczepaniak doesn't think everyone has to. The planting part of gardening, for one, is something that many good people can do on their own.

But the laying out of cobblestones? Building a pergola? Installing lights? All the so-called "hard-landscaping" elements?

"Quality details and craftsmanship are crucial in a small space. Beauty is in the detail," he says. "Unless you're very skilled, turn to professionals."

"We love this spot", says Trent Reid. "And the money you don't spend is the money you regret."

Charles Enman is an Ottawa writer.