

To combat a steeply sloped front yard, these homeowners built retaining walls and then planted such drought-resistant plants as lavender, gray santolina, zebra grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Kirk Alexander'), cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Boulevard') and native wild flowers (*Gaura lindheimeri* 'Whirling Butterfly').

## A Wall Runs Through It

A couple in North Carolina coped with the steep slope of their mountainside home by building a stepped garden anchored by dramatic sculptural walls. By Jorge S. Arango

**H**edy Fischer, who owns a real estate investment company in North Carolina with her artist companion, Randy Shull, had one proviso when they went house hunting: "I swore I'd never live in a house that was below street level."

Well never, as the adage goes, say never. When they came upon this 1960s ranch house in Asheville, set on the side of a mountain, the couple decided its magnificent backyard views of the city and surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains were too irresistible to pass up. Predictably, however, the purchase came with everything Fischer hated about below-the-street homes. "The previous owners had carved out a little walkway from the street, but it was awkward," she says. "And there was no front yard."

"There was a pretty serious slope that went straight from the street down to the house," adds Shull. "Water drained right to

the foundation. And when you went from the car to the front door, you had to walk at a downhill angle." There was also an enormous oak tree tilting precariously toward the roof.

After removing the threatening oak and back-hoeing a 140-foot-long, pie-shaped level space between the road and the house, Shull (who is actually a descendent of landscape-design legend Frederick Law Olmsted) disappeared into his studio to figure out logistics for a stepped garden for the front lawn that ended up featuring retaining walls of poured concrete sheathed in cedar and painted barn red. Brazilian ipe-wood decking now leads from the front door to a perpendicular slate path. And along the house, under three-foot-wide eaves, Shull designed a trench filled with Mexican black beach stones. "It's a nice, natural transition from the house to the plant material," observes Fischer.



The couple had traveled to “every Asian garden we could find,” says Fischer. “We wanted the sense of serenity that Asian gardens have,” she explains. What they didn’t want was to limit themselves to the severe strictures imposed by traditional Japanese gardens, which dictate the specific placement of rocks and plants. They were also unsure of what plants would work on the steep incline of the garden. So Shull and Fischer hired Kirk Alexander, a local landscape architect, to find a happy medium. Alexander’s solution was to sculpt the hill with verdant textures and a subdued palette of blossoms.

Meanwhile, nearby, developers were excavating ground for a new condo community, so Alexander and his clients had six truckloads of pink granite boulders (20 tons a load) hauled to the site. They collaborated on their placement, then Alexander filled everything in with drought-resistant plants—green and flowering—that could handle the severe drainage of the slope. Among these were various grasses, including Japanese blood grass (*Imperata* ‘Red Baron’), blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens* ‘Sapphire’), Japanese silver grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Morning Light’) and blue switch grass (*Panicum virgatum* ‘Heavy Metal’).

On the lowest level, by the paths, Alexander mixed ground covers, including dwarf wintercreeper (*Euonymus Fortunei* ‘Kewensis’) and, by the stone trench, a sea of *Juniperus procumbens* ‘Nana’ engulfing sculptural rocks and a weeping Norway spruce (*Picea abies* ‘Pendula’). The next level up explodes with lavender (*Lavandula x*



Clockwise from top left: Boulders were set in place with a crane; the stratified garden starts with yucca ‘Garland Gold’ and ground covers and moves up to lavender, blue oat grass, conifers and flowering plants; a path up to the road displays daylilies and Stoke’s asters (*Stokesia laevis* ‘Purple Parasol’); irises flourish in the backyard pond, which is surrounded by sedges; the stone trench provides a natural transition from the house to creeping junipers and weeping Norway spruce.

*intermedia* ‘Provence’) and above that, the plantings become looser, resembling, says Alexander, “a meadow.”

The walls wrap around the north side of the house and end at a small pond, with paths bordered in various sedges, including the variegated *Carex morrowii* ‘Ice Dance.’ Shull and Fischer selected most of the trees, placing them, says Shull, “like furniture.” There are many varieties of pine and cypress, as well as Japanese cut-leaf maples (*Acer palmatum* ‘Dissectum’).

“It’s sort of East meets Appalachia,” concludes Fischer.

“The stepped garden is a terrific way to display plants,” Alexander adds. “You see more that way, and it looks completely different from the top than it does from the bottom.” And Shull’s work produced a pleasant side effect: His pictures of the red walls helped him secure a public art commission to design a garden for a \$12 million park in Asheville that will involve intersecting planes similar to the ones he created for their garden. ☼

See Resources, last pages.

