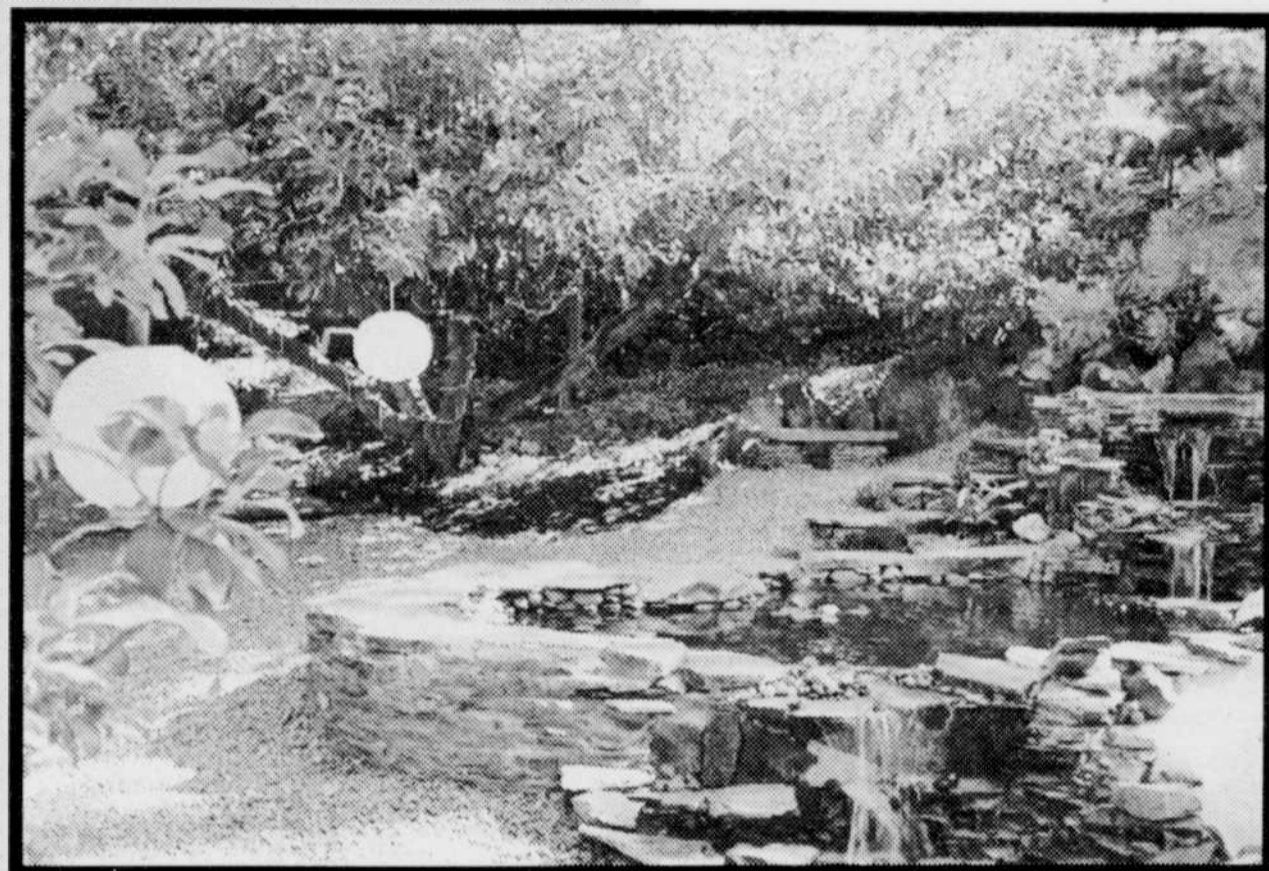


Getting Down and Dirty

Whatever your gardening challenge, professional help abounds in the queer community

BY ORIANA GREEN



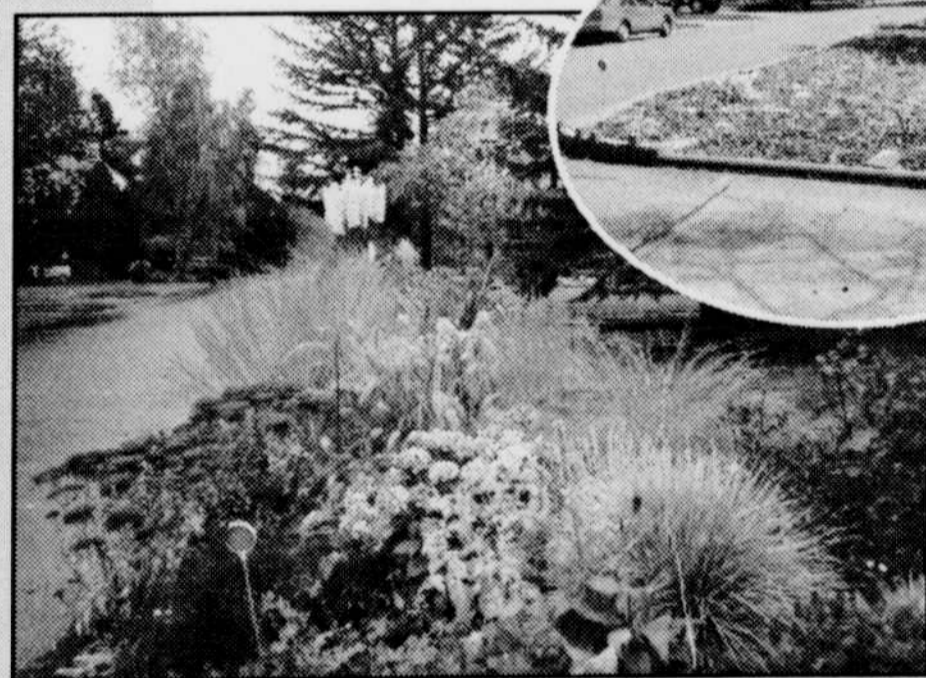
The lucky lesbian couple with this waterfall in their back yard enlisted their family to help create it. It took eight hours of digging, then Don Davidson took over and did the masonry

Spring is erasing winter in a burst of pastels and strange green things are sprouting in your so-called yard. They could be weeds or rare native perennials, and you're wondering if you should buy some instrument of destruction or try to figure out the mathematical mysteries of fertilizer. (18-6-12?)

Thankfully for the novice and seasoned gardener alike, the queer community is abloom with gardening and landscape professionals to help solve any green—or brown—dilemma. If you are clueless about how to proceed, or you don't have the time or interest to do it yourself, then a garden designer may be your salvation.

The training designers receive varies widely, reflecting areas of specialization. An experienced, self-taught gardener may be able to dash off some rough sketches and work with you to develop a pleasing result. Someone with more formal training in landscape design will be able to do actual blueprints for landscape installers. A person with a horticultural degree will be an expert on plant selection, and a landscape architect will be able to draw plans for major overhauls and construction of your dream gazebo or multilevel deck extravaganza. Some designers also install plants and features, while others just design and subcontract the rest. Understanding your options will help you choose the right designer for your own private Eden.

If you have any kind of special problem—such as a steep slope, poor drainage or overgrown mature trees and plants—you might want to opt for a thorough approach.



Before (inset): How most yards look without expert help. After: How the same front yard looks in autumn after Ena Morgan had her way with it

Ena J. Morgan is a landscape designer who believes in starting with plenty of information. She interviews her clients, has them fill out an extensive questionnaire, and she does a full site evaluation that includes soil analysis plus checking for issues concerning sightlines, exposures and drainage. Then she measures all existing structures and plantings to create an accurate base map.

Morgan then distills all this input into a preliminary design, which she presents using her library of plant materials to help clients end up with flora that reflects their tastes. She tries to incorporate a peaceful area into all her designs.

"People with stressful jobs especially need a sanctuary space," she explains. "Size is irrelevant; it's what you do with it."

The next step for Morgan is the final plan, plant lists and material specifications. One advantage of using a designer is that he or she can recommend particular varieties of plants suitable for your precise situation. You may be certain you want roses, but do you know which ones are fragrant repeat-bloomers and are also pest resistant?

For those so inclined, Morgan can also include a *feng shui* consultation.

Once the final plan is complete, clients sign a contract and then the process of bringing the drawings to vertical life begins.



TIP:

Morgan often recommends native plants because they are ecologically correct, require less maintenance and watering, and are more resistant to bad bugs.

For a typical home on a standard-sized lot, a design from Morgan runs between \$500 and \$1,000, which includes an hour of consultation with the landscape installer. Though she doesn't do installation, she can recommend qualified contractors, and she is also available to supervise the entire process.



TIP:

If you want to do everything yourself, you may be able to hire a designer for a few hours of consultation to get you headed in the right direction and avoid costly mistakes. Morgan charges \$45 per hour plus mileage for consultations.

With a degree in landscape architecture and 20 years experience as an estate gardener, John Caine has been the designer for gay-owned Joy Creek Nursery for the past five years.

"A garden is a system," he says, "and my goal is to solve problems. What do homeowners value—privacy, serenity, color? My job is to present a multitude of possibilities," he says, adding that proper circulation is crucial.



TIP:

Installing gravel or stone paths throughout your garden, even behind large beds, is the key to enjoying year-round gardening. Mud is the number one reason people don't work outside during the rainy season.

Caine explains that a garden "is made up of three things: mass, space and circulation." Then he quickly adds that each garden also needs a work area. Trying to do without one is "like building a house without a kitchen."



PHOTO BY KATHY ROCKWELL

Don Davidson shows off his rock-hard paths

One problem he often sees with gardeners who have focused all their attention on annual and perennial beds is that their landscapes lack structure and flow, the larger shrubs and trees that frame a garden and provide "bones," a backdrop for the showier flowers.

Caine teaches free classes most Saturday mornings at the nursery on topics such as drip-dry plants, container gardening and using plants to create walls. (See resource list for more information.)

Caine charges \$125 for his first consultation, and a typical home landscape design runs from \$800 to \$1,000.

As a way to save money, he suggests you measure and inventory your own yard, then sketch your plot map yourself.

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Questions to Ask Yourself

- What activities do I want to enjoy in my yard?
- Do I need to coexist with dogs who dig?
- How much time will I really, truly spend on maintenance?
- Am I willing to invest time in learning about plant care?
- How important is year-round visual interest and color?
- Do I want to provide wildlife habitat?
- How badly do I want to block the view of my neighbor's bathroom?
- What's my budget?