

POWER *Planning*

When presented with a challenging property, one Houston-based landscape design company provided stellar solutions.

Who doesn't enjoy a good challenge, especially in this industry?

by LORI SICHTERMANN

When approached with a one-of-a-kind landscape project that promised plenty of obstacles, the all-woman team at Houston-based Home & Habitat LLC accepted the opportunity to apply its ingenuity and trusted business practices in order to meet (and exceed) the expectations of the client.

By way of builder referral, the homeowner contacted Home & Habitat in September 2006 — months before the builder was scheduled to break ground on the new home. On the surface, the homeowner's requests were relatively simple: Create a lovely, low-maintenance landscape that complements the French-influenced architecture of the home while also preserving the natural, forest-like feel of the property. However, the full scope of the project would go much deeper — 20 to 25 feet deeper, in fact.

The property is nestled among a handful of new home developments in the well-groomed Tanglewood area of Houston. Unique to this particular piece of land is its proximity to one of the many bayous that meander throughout the Houston area. The home, and its landscaping, would have to be constructed on a long, narrow, forested ravine lot, complete with a 25-foot drop down to the center of the ravine.

Due to the unique property lines and spatial restrictions, the homeowner requested that the landscape design planning take place early in the construction process. The client was adamant that every inch of space be used to its fullest potential — no small task for such a slice of land.

"We were called in because the uniqueness of the property needed to be addressed sooner rather than later," recalls Janet Ireland, president of Home & Habitat. "Too often, clients are so attentive to light fixtures, plumbing and every other detail that goes into the building process that they leave planning the landscape and the drainage to the end. So, we're always pleased when clients call us first for a master-design plan. It just makes for a better outcome all the way around."

Getting started. Nearly a year after Home & Habitat was contracted to design the Tanglewood site, work finally began on the property. The first item on the massive "to-do" list was the side elevation of the ravine wall, so that a pathway and a patio space could be created. Once the work began, the builder and the landscape crew soon found they needed to work out some logistical issues as a result of the site's limited access.

"One of the big problems with the site was that the frontage along the street was really small," Ireland notes. "So, there were a lot of contractors vying for places to put

their supplies or to access the property.”

Eventually, space issues were resolved, and both parties set to work. According to Ireland, prior to pouring the foundation of the house, the builder reinforced the ravine side of the property with machine-placed moss rock boulders. After the boulders were in place, the Home & Habitat crew began its work on the ravine.

For the company, the most laborious aspect of the ravine project was the hand-placement of 47 additional tons of moss rock boulders.

“Access to the ravine wall was so difficult that only one boulder at a time could be placed,” Ireland says. “Only four men could work at a time on that portion of the project.”

Because there was no access for heavy machinery, the landscape crew used only a dolly and poles for leverage. Additionally, 17 tons of crushed granite and 20 yards of bank sand were hauled in with wheelbarrows to fill the expanded area that serves as a permeable base for the flagstone patio.

“It was difficult bringing in so much material,” Ireland says. “[We] had to have extra deliveries, which meant we had to work with the builder and other contractors on placement so that people weren’t stepping on each other’s toes.”

Amid the struggle for space, the builder and Home & Habitat’s landscape crew were able to construct the ravine wall. By the following spring, the house and the

initial ravine construction were nearly complete. It was now time to work on planting the front.

The right tools. The plant selection process is an area in which Home & Habitat is well-versed.

“We’re specialists in plant choices,” Ireland states. “That may sound unexpected, but we see a lot of misuse of plant material. Therefore, we’re very thoughtful in our approach to plant choices for each site.”

To proactively combat the “misuse” of plant material, Ireland and the design team at Home & Habitat have dedicated themselves to becoming native plant aficionados.

“Our tag line is ‘Unique, Houston-



With the small street frontage, staging materials for the landscape construction and building process was a challenge that required extra deliveries and coordination with the builder.



A line of six ‘East Palatka’ holly trees (*Ilex* × *attenuata* ‘East Palatka’) was planted as a vertical “green screen” along the property line shared with the neighbor.

The western exposure of the formal façade features a classic layering of *Cleyera* and *Loropetalum* shrubs. Bicolor irises lighten the mood with a wispy look, and a trio of single-trunk crape myrtles (*Lagerstroemia indica*) enhances the home’s European look.



To raise the side elevation of the ravine wall, 47 tons of moss rock boulders were hand-placed. Seventeen tons of crushed granite and 20 yards of bank sand were hauled in with wheelbarrows to fill the expanded area and serve as a permeable base for the flagstone patio.



A low, iron fence was added along the ravine rock wall in anticipation of future safety concerns for grandchildren. Pockets of autumn fern planted along the rock wall soften the fence line and blend the structure with its natural surroundings.

Hardy Plants,” Ireland notes. “What we’re trying to do is get people to understand that if you choose the right plants in the right places, there will be less stress on those plants; they’re going to thrive and not need chemicals, and they’re not going to have pest infestations.

“When you base your landscape on a diverse plant palette, then you’re doing good things for the environment,” Ireland continues. “We use as many native plants as possible. Not everybody wants a wild-looking yard, so we try to blend [natives] with the traditional choices. That’s one of the things we’re known for — our knowledge of native plants and how the natural system works. We do residential landscaping with attention to the improvement of habitat in our urban setting.”

Home & Habitat has a unique advantage when it comes to selecting plants for use in its landscape design projects. Ireland’s husband, Rick, owns and operates H & H Wholesale Nursery, which supplies Home & Habitat with its plant materials. The wholesale business is located adjacent to Home & Habitat, and Ireland often takes advantage of the close proximity of her plant supplier.

“It really is wonderful to review the plan with a client in our office and then step outside to show them the plant choices,” Ireland says. “[The client] gets a good feel for how the plant combinations

will look together. We’ve gotten to the point now that if we know ahead of time that a client is coming we’ll do a lineup — pulling the tree and shrub selections and placing the groundcover at the base of the shrubs so as to demonstrate for them, as close as possible, the combination of plants.”

The wish list. With an arsenal of healthy native plants and the knowledge of how to use them to their fullest potential, the designers were then able to ad-

dress the homeowner’s desires for the Tanglewood site. As this was not the client’s first professional landscape contract, he came equipped with a detailed “wish list” for the landscape project. And, because the homeowner expressed a wish to spend more time traveling than doing yard work, his top priority — when it came to selecting plant materials — was low maintenance.

“He didn’t want any lawn,” Ireland recalls. “The frontage along the street was pretty minimal anyway, so instead of using grass, we used dwarf mondo grass as a groundcover. It provides for a neat, low-maintenance groundcover in the front

Snapshot

Company name: Home & Habitat LLC

President: Janet Ireland

Location: Houston, TX

History: When Janet Ireland started the company in 1998, she was the sole crewmember, working out of the back of her Toyota 4Runner SUV and with a trailer she bartered from a client in exchange for a landscape upgrade. After two years of business, she acquired a crew and a bigger truck, which she continued to drive as the company’s referral base increased. After many successful projects in the Houston area, Ireland was able to hang up her truck keys and dedicate more energy toward being the company’s president and creative director.

On the design end: Home & Habitat has an all-woman design team that consists of landscape architects, garden designers, a horticulture specialist and a color specialist.

Philosophy: According to Ireland, “When you base your landscape on a plant palette that has diversity, then you’re doing good things for the environment by having a variety of plant material in your neighborhood. We use as many native plants as possible — that’s where the ‘habitat’ in the company name comes from. We do residential landscaping with attention to the improvement of habitat in our urban setting.”

planting space near the parking court. Large marsh rabbits in the area have been found to nibble on Asian jasmine, so it was not a reliable choice for this property.”

The client also requested that the ravine area be left as natural as possible. To adhere to these wishes, Ireland and her team supplemented some Texas natives that are helpful with erosion and that provide a more natural look. Native Walter’s viburnum (*Viburnum obovatum*), ferns and classic Indica azaleas were used to surround a new Shumard red oak (*Quercus shumardii*) addition to the forest area.

To further extend the natural, forest-like feel of the cul-de-sac home, Home & Habitat also planted a line of six ‘East Palatka’ holly trees (*Ilex x attenuata* ‘East Palatka’) as a vertical “green screen” instead of installing a fence along the property line shared with the neighbor. These evergreen trees can be sheared to keep growth manageable in this tight space.

A priority for the client was the development of a seating area within the forest, thus a patio was part of the initial ravine wall construction. For the forest patio, hardscape materials were chosen for neutral coloration and consistency with the naturalistic look along the ravine side. Thick, Ozark brown flagstone was installed as the patio surface, while small moss rocks were used to border the fern beds along the house.

The woodland seating area was surrounded by existing groundcovers and the understory of native cherry laurel (*Prunus*

Prior to pouring the foundation of the house, the builder reinforced the ravine side of the property with machine-placed moss rock boulders.



Nestled into the natural area, the lower-level patio was constructed with flagstone and is accessed by steps formed by the placement of large, flat, moss rock boulders.

caroliniana) and yaupon (*Ilex vomitoria*) trees, giving the area a “hideaway” feeling. The rock planting beds were filled with the dramatic foliage of angel wing begonias (*Begonia coccinea*) for an appealing view while stepping down to the patio or looking out from inside the home.

A low, iron fence was added along the ravine rock wall for safety concerns regarding grandchildren. Pockets of autumn fern planted along the rock wall softened the fence line and blended the structure with its natural surroundings.

Some additional construction also was done to the ravine. A natural drainage channel along the back property line was restored and lined with bull rock. Step stones were set in medium gravel to create a path in a drainage runoff area. For erosion control in the landscape, native Virginia sweetspire shrubs (*Itea virginica*) were planted to stabilize the soil and handle the intermittent wet conditions of this area.

After work was completed with the naturalization of the ravine landscape, Ireland’s landscape crews had to do a 180-degree shift, so to speak, with regard to landscaping the home’s façade. For the front of the home, the client requested a more formal look to enhance the structure’s elegant, French architecture.

“It was nice to be able to use two different styles of landscaping on the same property,” Ireland recalls. “We had the more naturalistic and softer look along the side, while the front had a more formal, layered, traditional look.”

Yet, as with most of the property, there were constraints that limited the types, and amounts, of plant material that could be used in the front of the home. Consid-

ering the space restrictions and the homeowner’s desire for a low-maintenance (albeit formal) landscape, the Home & Habitat team selected a classic layering of *Cleyera* and *Loropetalum* shrubs. Bicolor irises lightened the mood with a wispy look, and a trio of single-trunk crape myrtles (*Lagerstroemia indica*) enhanced the European design along the street.

“The façade of the house has a very neutral color stone, so we wanted to give it some color in the landscape that was year-round,” Ireland says. “Therefore, we used the burgundy foliage of *Loropetalum* shrubs. It’s become a dependable shrub here in Texas, having been used more in the last five to eight years.”

To accent the vertical interest of the façade, ‘East Palatka’ holly trees were planted to flank the entry. A dark green ‘Little Gem’ magnolia tree (*Magnolia grandiflora* ‘Little Gem’) was selected to stand boldly against the side of the turret, while seasonal color was placed in European-style concrete urns positioned at the doorway.

After just under two years of planning, coordinating, building and planting, the landscape for the Tanglewood-area home was finally complete. The project was a rewarding experience for Home & Habitat in that it enabled the design team and crews to implement its design and problem-solving skills in unique ways — as unique as this particular piece of land. Though the project presented numerous challenges, the company rose to those challenges to create an innovative landscape that is easy on the eye, as well as the environment.

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The customer requested a “no-mow” landscape. Dwarf mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*) provides for a neat, low-maintenance groundcover in the front planting space near the parking court.