



GREAT GARDENS ACROSS AMERICA

ROCKY MOUNTAIN TOUGH

ASPEN, CO

20 acres and a Rocky Mountain garden get a new lease on life

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON DEWEY

The aspen trees around this Colorado house have not grown here forever. Nor have wildflowers bloomed for long across nearby meadows that roll down the Conundrum Valley toward Rocky Mountain ridges about 5 miles from the town of Aspen. The house itself is little more than a decade old, and when landscape architect Sheri Sanzone first saw it in 2004, it was still hemmed in by a half-finished patio; eroding, rough-graded slopes; and endless turf-grass carpets. Even the driveway, an amorphous gravel strip that straggled up to the front door, was an incomplete thought. “There was just enough landscape to make it look ‘done,’” recalls Sanzone, a principal at Bluegreen, a design firm based in Aspen.

When the property changed hands, the new owners seized the chance to fill in the blanks, in this rugged climate that only native and hardy plants can endure. An

active, East Coast couple with children, they planned to use the house for ski and summer vacations, and they wanted areas outside where they could lounge, dine, and entertain amid the panoramic views. In addition to ornamental edge plantings, they also aimed to revamp the surrounding 20 acres, a declining aspen grove damaged by contaminants from historic mining in the 1880s.

Sanzone, whose firm is known for environmentally sensitive landscapes, conceived a two-part program to restore the natural setting and create outdoor rooms around the house. She developed guidelines for the restoration, which is ongoing and includes replacing dead or dying aspens with young trees planted in clusters to up the odds of their survival. Some fallen trees are being preserved as habitat for nesting birds, others are run through a chipper to make mulch for hiking trails.

Closer to the home, Sanzone carved out gravel-lined and vegetated drainage swales and used them with existing ponds to collect and filter water flowing through the acreage. Planted with native *Festuca idahoensis* (Idaho fescue) and ryegrass that

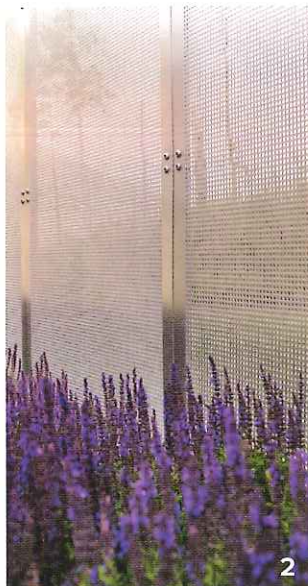
process and filter pollutants, the swales also slow the speed of surface water, letting it percolate into soil layers for further filtering. She then removed most of the non-native turf grass, which required too much irrigation, mowing, and chemical fertilizing, and amended compacted clay soil with organic compost to improve drainage. On slopes below the house where lawn once grew she seeded wild grasses and flowers that “mimic,” she says, “what you’d find here in nature.” Sprinkled across shaggy fields of *Achnatherum hymenoides* (Indian ricegrass) and Idaho fescue are the same columbines, salvias, lupines, and wild blue iris that bloom on surrounding hills.

For outdoor living areas, she and her team took cues from the layout and materials of the house. Designed by Washington, DC, architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen, the house appears like a modern riff on a stone mountain lodge, consisting of linked pavilions with huge, view-framing windows. “Our job,” Sanzone explains, “was to draw

On the sheltered, north side of the house, a stylized meadow tucks around a terrace in bands of *Festuca idahoensis* (Idaho fescue), *Salvia x sylvestris* 'Blue Queen', and *Hemerocallis* 'Stella de Oro' that add softness to the architecture.







DISTINCTIVE
DETAILS

1 WATER GARDEN

Water cascades into a pond edged with stone, Idaho fescue, a gravel strolling path, and three *Acer ginnala* 'Flame' (Amur maple), chosen for their bright-red fall foliage.

2 STEEL BACKDROP

Salvia x sylvestris 'Blue Queen' blooms in color-rich masses against a stainless-steel fence. This perforated screen divides garden rooms while letting in light, air, and views.

3 MOUNTAIN STREAM

Water spills down a steel spout through an opening in stone walls, amid rustling Idaho fescue.

4 REFLECTIVE TERRACES

One unattractive block retaining wall was sheathed in stainless steel and the others were covered in *Juniperus horizontalis* 'Wiltonii' (blue rug creeping juniper) and 'Valley Cushion' mugo pine. The lower border holds a mix of daylilies, salvia, and sedum.



“Every window was an opportunity for a viewing garden; every interior space suggested an adjacent outdoor room.”

—Sheri Sanzone

the architectural lines outside, both to lead your eye and connect the house to its setting with spaces you could *be* in. Every window was an opportunity for a viewing garden; every interior space suggested an adjacent outdoor room.”

The most striking vistas open to the south, where wings of the house extend and shelter either end of a terrace. Initially, some wall and paving bits remained from the earlier, unfinished garden, and Sanzone liked their echoes of the home’s limestone cladding and bluestone floors. She recycled and added to existing stone to create areas for dining (off the kitchen), enjoying an outdoor fire (off the living room), and relaxing (off the master bedroom). New walls bump out to offer seating but are low enough to set the stage for mountain views. Architectural detailing also inspired her design for an ipe-wood lounge between the fire pit and house, and heaped cushions add color and comfort.

On the home’s northern side, a colder,

Above left: Inspired by the architecture and materials of the house, a south-facing terrace complements indoor spaces with outdoor dining and living rooms partitioned by the merest suggestion of walls. *Achillea* (yarrow) blooms in the meadow below; white-trunked aspens rise on the hill above. *Above right:* The colors and textures of climate-hardy plants are easy to read and appreciate as they line up against a corner of the seat walls.

more exposed area overlooking woods, Sanzone turned an empty gravel patch into the water garden, with corners for reading and contemplation. She sited a children’s play yard just beyond the garden walls, out of sight but not earshot, and planted textured borders in a stylized version of surrounding meadows. For the “cultivated meadow,” she chose plants that echo certain qualities of their wild counterparts but in a more orderly and intense spirit. She knew that the owners, whose expectations for the garden were shaped by the colorful, seasonal drama of East Coast landscapes, would want longer bloom times and brighter hues than nature offered, with a more tidy presentation. Limiting plant varieties and massing them in graphic bands makes this garden less chaotic than a true meadow, Sanzone says, yet her choices still manage to repeat the tones and textures of the nearby natives: in the courtyard garden, the dense spires of *Salvia x sylvestris* ‘Blue Queen’ stand in for less showy native *Salvia azurea*, and compact *Hemerocallis* ‘Stella de Oro’ for yellow columbine and gloriosa daisies. Idaho fescue, which exists in the surrounding grassland, was planted as well. Her substitutions are also winter-hardy which goes a long way in this harsh, high-altitude region that ranges between Zones 3 and 4.

The same tough, pared-down palette of

Idaho fescue, purple salvia, and compact daylilies appears in other beds throughout the 1-acre, developed landscape, a linking theme between the house and elements like the new, exposed-aggregate drive, and a verdant, terraced hillside. Another connector, sparked by the home’s metal roof, is stainless steel, which Sanzone used to face an ugly retaining wall for the same hill and repeated in a perforated-steel screen that divides garden areas without cutting off light and views.

Wherever you wander, there’s always a glimpse of the scene beyond—a blooming meadow, a line of tossing trees. These are almost always aspens, the property’s most prominent motif, and one that now, after long decline, is improving. Fall is particularly dramatic in the Rockies: fleeting, but worth savoring as the aspens turn golden against the distant ridge and sky. 🌲

The patio lounging area is centered on the best view in the house. It features a crowd-size daybed and cushioned benches wrapping around a fire pit. Built-in lights are low-voltage LEDs, and outdoor upholstery stands up to summer sun.

