

Gravel Gardens
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Removing the turf in our front parkway was a seminal event in the evolution of our garden. Call me a slow learner--nearly 20 years elapsed between the time we began the garden and the day of reckoning—if you like. Low those many moons we lived with what Colorado garden writer Lauren Springer aptly labeled “hellstrips; those bands of tortured lawn sandwiched between sidewalk and curb. Heavy foot traffic reduced the parkways to a muddy mess in winter while the summer sun fried the grass leaving strips of scorched earth.

But first things first. In the interim the back garden gradually morphed from an inner city wasteland to a private garden haven sequestered and screened from the public eye. Our private space is intimate screened from surrounding homes and buildings by trees, shrubs and built structures. Terraces, porches, pathways, seating areas, funky art and a plethora of plants reflect the gardens’ urban vernacular.

A philosophy of openness guided the development of the front wall garden. The construction of a stone retaining wall bordering the sidewalk 10 years ago reduced the steep slope creating a gradual transition between the house and street. The wall wraps around the corner from lot line to lot line facing the street on two sides. A stone bench nestled in the corner entices the unwary passersby to sit and relax enveloped by garden.

The grass parkways adjacent to the curb were the last vestiges of the original landscape to undergo renovation. Trading places with the turf are gravel-mulched beds filled with Mediterranean and dry-land plants that revel in full sun, rapidly draining soil and have no need for summer water. A series of pebble mosaic walkways, loosely patterned after

Persian rugs, are my “flying carpets” allowing access to the sidewalk for people getting in and out of their cars. The gravel beds are the missing link, establishing a synergistic relationship between the house, garden and street. A stroll down the sidewalk takes you through the garden—a very different experience than simply walking by.

The gravel beds are more than just pretty faces—they are sustainable gardens that, once the plants are established, receive no supplemental water or fertilizer. The back and wall gardens are threaded with soaker hoses but there is no irrigation in the streetside beds. New plants are dependent on my occasional and often nocturnal visits with the hose which I grudgingly drag down the sidewalk .

Preparing the beds for drought tolerant plants required removing 12-18 inches of the existing clay soil. I ordered a custom soil blend containing compost, sandy loam, digested fiber (a polite euphemism for manure), and a higher than normal percentage of pumice. Soil is graded so that the center of the beds crown 4-6 inches above the grade of the sidewalk. After planting the beds are top dressed with 1-2 inches of ¼-10 gravel which serves as a mulch as well as protecting plants from crown rot in the rainy season. The gravel is easy to weed and dries out quickly after it rains.

Plants from many Mediterranean-like climatic regions have found their way into the garden. It is an ongoing and exciting horticultural experiment. All of the beds but two are in full sun. *Eriophyllum lanatum*, our Northwest native Oregon Sunshine, blankets the ground around *Ceanothus gloriosus* ‘Emily Brown’ in the shelter of the high canopy of a pre-existing flowering cherry. Later, *Hebe* ‘Purple Picture’ graces the bed with shiny purple tinted foliage and an unending supply of violet racemes that persist into February during mild winters.

Penstemon, both hybrids and species types thrive in the quickly draining soil as do the usual suspects, heaths and heathers, salvias , lavenders and sedums. An orphan *Euphorbia* ‘Red Wing’, left over from a design project, ended up in a gravel bed where I expected it to perish. Much to my surprise the spurge has thrived in the hot, dry

environment. It is paired with *Helleborus x sternii*, a cross between *Helleborus lividus* and *Helleborus argutifolius*, both sun lovers from the Mediterranean.

Olearia x scilloniensis, although originating in an English garden, derives its parentage from two Australian species. In April and May the beautifully branched shrub is smothered by hundreds of small white daisies. Its closest companion x *Halmiociustus wintonensis* ‘Merrist Wood Cream’ a bi-generic cross celebrates spring with cistus-like creamy, saucer shaped blossoms with a burgundy basal blotch. Both are evergreen and reliably hardy emerging unscathed from the ice and snow of January, 2004. *Phygelius* ‘Sensation’ a newer cape fuchsia with raspberry-pink pendant flowers that just keep coming delights gardener and hummingbird alike until late autumn.

Finally I have a place to trial bulbs that don’t survive wet winters in our heavy clay soil. Species crocus, tulips and iris begin pushing up out of the gravel in late winter. The vivid blue, exotic looking, cone shaped heads of *Scilla peruviana* rise out of tufts of evergreen foliage in late spring. The peacock flower, *Tigridia pavonia*, struts its showy red, orange, yellow or white flowers during the summer causing inquisitive strangers to stop and stare. *Sternbergia lutea*, known as the winter daffodil, shyly unfurls sunny yellow, goblet-shaped blooms in late autumn just before *Nerine bowdenii* presents its bubblegum pink umbels of sweetly scented flowers.

The gravel garden delights me on many levels; it is place to trial new plants and think outside the box. But most of all it is the physical manifestation of a commitment to community—a gift to the street.