An Almost Instant Garden

John Beaudry puts it together in a year

by CAROLYN ULRICH
photos by LINDA OYAMA BRYAN
A GARDEN DOESN'T HAPPEN OVERNIGHT, but if you know what you're doing, you can make one look really good in just a year.

John Beaudry knows what he's doing, so when he moved into his Rogers Park house he immediately began making plans for transforming its 30 by 45 foot backyard into a plantsman's wonderland. Just one year later, a wonderland it is, with hundreds of deftly placed perennials framed by a select mix of 36 shrubs and small trees, all of them looking surprisingly mature. "Everyone who visits thinks the garden's been here for years," he comments.

To be sure, Beaudry came to his latest project with a background in horticulture and several years of work as a professional designer, but there are no tricks to what he achieved—just careful planning, a logical sequence of tasks, a deep knowledge of plants, plus an ample dollop of plain old-fashioned good taste. To walk around the side of the modest two-story house and emerge into the now transformed backyard is a sure way to give yourself one of those "oh, wow!" experiences. The garden is stunning.

The space is organized into color groupings. Just west of the walkway that leads to a patio there's a small white garden. The patio is in turn bordered by reds and pinks on one side and a bubbling water feature surrounded by chartreuse and purple on the other. Along both the east and west edges of the property shrubs and small trees are developing into an informal "plant wall," a small lawn stands in the center, while a "tapestry garden," organized around foliage color and texture, fronts the wall of his garage.

"A good garden to me has to have all the layers... including everything from trees to shrubs to herbaceous plants to annuals to bulbs."
AT THE BEGINNING, THE SPACE WAS “PRETTY MUCH A BLANK CANVAS,” recalls Beaudry. Still, step one was to look around and analyze what he wanted to keep. The “saves” included a chlorotic whitepire birch, three sickly Catawba rhododendrons and an arborvitaes. Not surprising choices when you learn that during the days when Beaudry had his own business, he saw himself as “a residential designer with a real passion for woody plants.” Beaudry corrected the chlorosis on the birch with a three-pronged approach: sulfur for the long term, chelated iron for the short term, plus a foliar spray such as Miracid to help the tree green up quickly. “This is a common problem for people in Chicago,” notes Beaudry. “Red maples, red oaks, and birches all get chlorotic.” The rhododendrons received the same treatment.
Once he had decided what he wanted to keep, Beaudry’s next step was to make a design on paper. Although most of us aren’t designers, it’s important to make some kind of scale drawing. It helps you figure out if everything you want to do will fit or if something is too small. When he moved in, for example, the sidewalk to the garage was only two feet wide. “You had to lean to the side to keep from brushing the fence,” he recalls.

Third came soil improvement. Living near the lake, Beaudry’s soil was a very fine, silty-sandy mix—easier to work with than clay, but sadly lacking in organic matter. He added “tons” of compost and horse manure (see Sources below) and points out that the manure was fresh (i.e. one week to a month old, and not composted). He emphasizes that it’s crucial when using fresh manure that you not place it in contact with plants lest they get burned.

The patio and walkway were laid out next. Constructed of bluestone, these hardscape items are essential elements in the garden’s overall structure. For edging Beaudry used aluminum, which he liked because it’s lightweight and easy to work with, but he notes that if you step on it, it bends. Other edging possibilities include steel, which can be pounded down if it heaves in winter, and plastic. Although Beaudry won’t go so far as to say one should never use plastic, he says he would never use it in his own garden because when it heaves out of the ground, the only way to get it back in place is to re-

dig and start over.

Once the analysis, drawing, soil correction, and hardscape construction were complete, it was time to begin planting. “A good garden to me has to have all the layers,” asserts Beaudry. “That means including everything from trees to shrubs to herbaceous plants to annuals to bulbs. This adds to a garden’s complexity. It’s also important to have something that carries the eye through the space—e.g., a repetition of shapes or colors or the line of a curving walk. Another essential component is mystery.”

An example of what he means by mystery is in the way he handled the water feature. A small pool (which he likes to call “a well”), it is surrounded by plants so you hear it before you actually see it. “A garden isn’t just visual,” he maintains, “and it’s important to realize that all water sounds aren’t the same. A pulsating sprinkler, for example, might make you feel nervous. I worked with various pump depths so I could get the subtle and relaxing bubbling sound I wanted.”

Although Beaudry has sought out lesser used plants such as the 6-foot tall Angelica gigas and the unusual Picea abies ‘Acrocona’, (a dwarf spruce with purplish-maroon cones that are dramatic against the plant’s chartreuse new growth), what really makes this or any garden “work” is placement. For example, he deliberately set the Carolina silverbell tree (Halesia carolina) in front of the jack pine (Pinus banksiana) so its white flowering bells would stand out against the pine’s darker background. In the bed of reds and pinks, dianthus grows near the maroon-tinted foliage of the Penstemon ‘Husker Red’, whose flowers are also pink, producing a tone on tone effect. Back by the garage, the dark green of the holly Ilex meservee ‘Blue Boy’ comes alive when paired with the new chartreuse-leaved Lamium maculatum ‘Beedham’s White’. Of such thoughtful touches are memorable gardens made.

Fragrance—which adds to a garden’s mystery—is also important. Beaudry deliberately selected fragrant plants for the patio area because “you want it to be fragrant where you’re
going to spend time.” Key plants here include the shrub summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*), Oriental lilies, the honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum* var. *seroina*), brugmansia, oregano, and thyme—there’s always something different in bloom.

A few feet away, a lilac—also fragrant—grows through the rails of the deck, a garden feature Beaudry could do without. “The deck was here when I moved in, but I don’t really like decks. To me a deck looks naked and it makes me want to put clothes on it. In a garden the clothes are plants.”

And so we come to another reason why he kept that chlorotic birch. Already 15 feet tall, it goes a long way towards camouflaging the deck’s south end as well as providing a framework on which the yellow *Clematis tangutica* can grow. A newly planted ‘Fire Dance’ maple stands at the other end. In between, two shrub form serviceberries (*Amelanchier stolonifera*), *Rosa glauca* with its outstanding blue-gray foliage, and a motley mix of containers join to soften the otherwise stark architecture.

Concealing the unsightly also involves blocking selected views. For Beaudry his sightline from the kitchen included a taxi parked in the alley alongside one of the neighbor’s garages. The jack pine, taller than some of the other woody plants, does double duty here as a screen. The other woody plants in turn do double duty as a fence. “The word ‘garden’ means a safe space, a haven, something protected,” he asserts, “In a city it really needs to be enclosed, but a fence can be harsh and unfriendly. I like the sense of enclosure that’s not a total barrier, and I can do that with a small shrub border.”

Beaudry has been interested in plants since he was five years old when he began asking a neighbor the names of the plants in her perennial garden. “I wouldn’t remember, of course, so I would go back the following day and ask her again. I was always excited about what was coming next.” Soon he was pressing his parents for a garden of his own, and when he was six he got one. “It was about the size of a table and had rows of zinnias and marigolds. I recall looking up at the flowers and being amazed that they had come from tiny seeds. I was hooked from that point.”

The passion for plants that was engendered in childhood continues, although it is now fixated on specialties such as the Stewartia tree with its “amazing flaking bark” and recent introductions such as the Seven Sons Tree (*Heptacodium minacoides*) which produces showy pinkish bracts in fall. Yet Beaudry is always a designer first and plant collector second. What is always important in designing, he insists, is to “have a picture of the future. You always need to know what your plants have the potential to become.”

---

**Sources:**

E-Z Tree Recycling
7050 S. Dorchester
Chicago
773-493-8600
Compost, mulch for sale

The Noble Horse
1410 N. Orleans
Chicago
312-266-7878
Manure
Open 7 days a week, help yourself

The Resource Center
1325 E. 70th
Chicago 773-821-1351
Compost, mulch for sale