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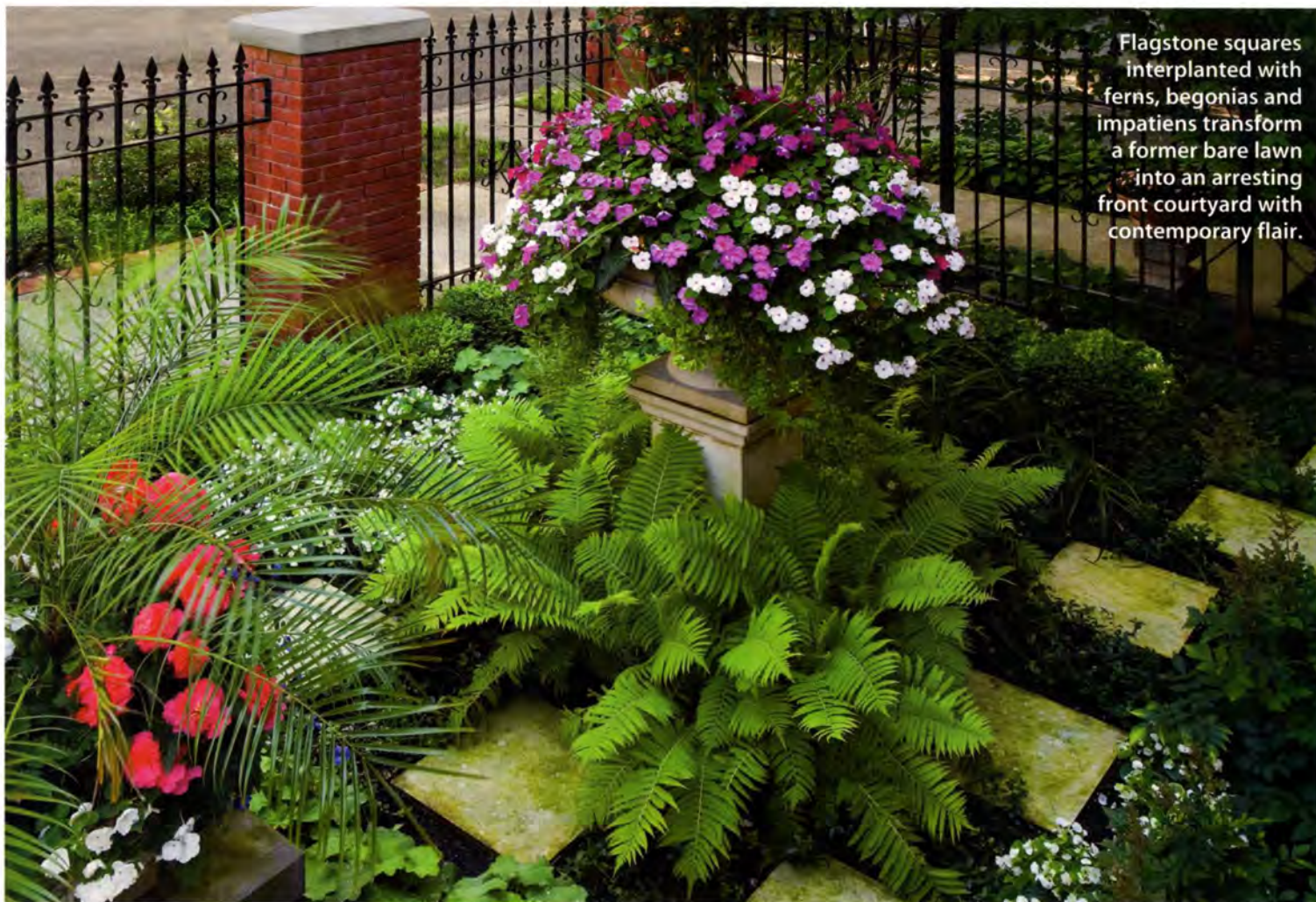


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Unique Challenges, Unique Delights

The brick sidewalk with its flagstone inlay provides a thematic link to the existing architecture.



Flagstone squares interplanted with ferns, begonias and impatiens transform a former bare lawn into an arresting front courtyard with contemporary flair.

With its clever, well-thought-out design, a narrow city lot fulfills the needs of an expanding family. **By Carolyn Ulrich Photography By Linda Oyama Bryan**

Designing for a small city space poses unique challenges. The basic lot is usually a narrow 20 or 22 feet wide. If there is a garage in the rear — invaluable in many densely populated neighborhoods — that limits the space for a garden and play area even more. There may be too much shade for many flowering plants. Existing architecture may strongly suggest complementary or even identical hardscape features. If there's an alley, it may be too narrow for unloading, and so the workmen park their trucks in front of the house where they endure the wrath of waiting drivers hitting their horns and perchance letting loose a choice epithet or two.

Such were the constraints placed on David Van Zelst, landscape architect and principal with Van Zelst, Inc. of Wadsworth, when he set forth to design a garden for this residence in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood.

The house was a red brick 3-story Grecian Revival, built in 2004 and compatible with the 19th century structures prevalent in the neighborhood. An iron fence and brick pillars enclosed the property, and there was a parkway out front.

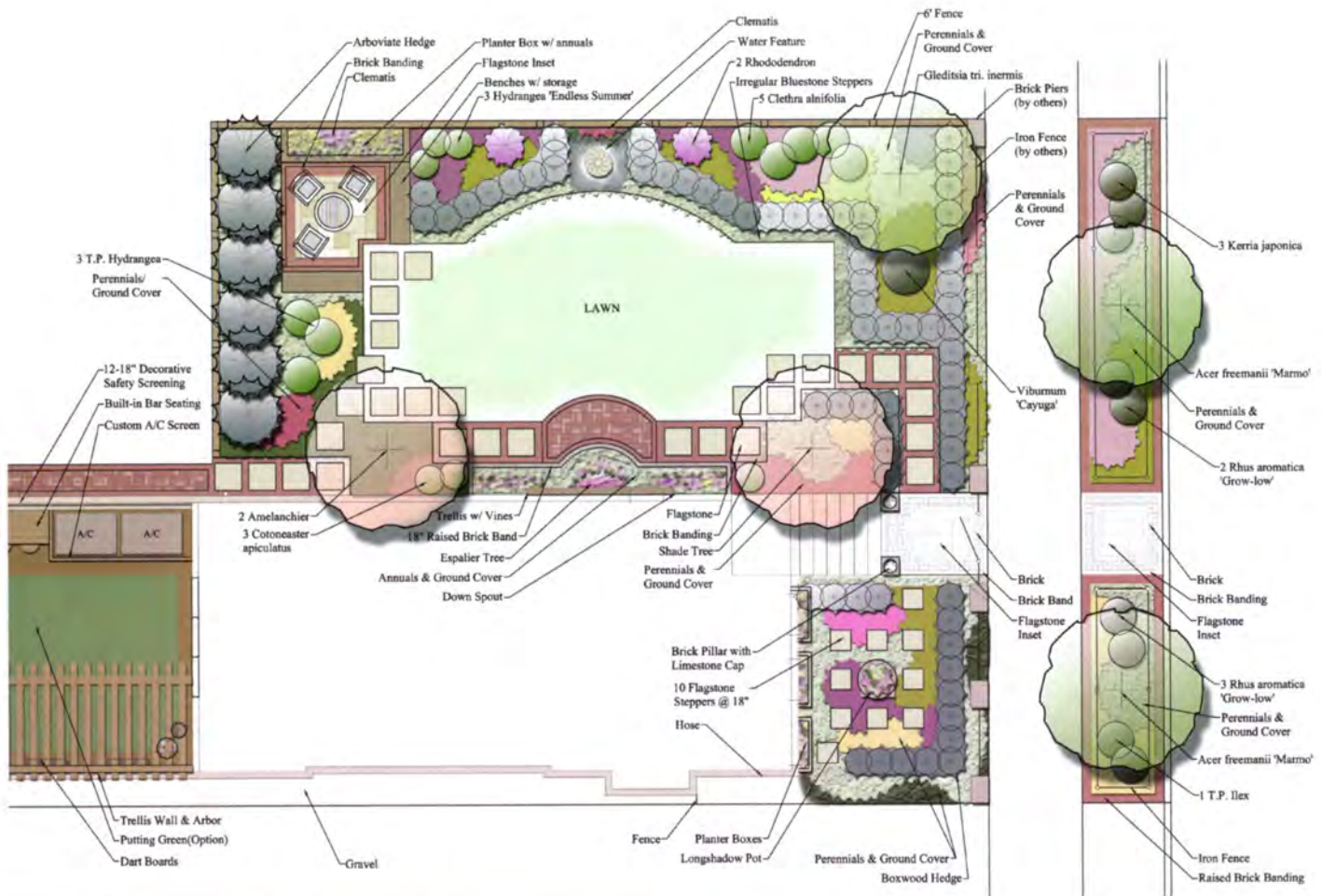
The clients were a young family with two small children who needed a place to run and play. But the parents also wanted an adult-friendly space where they could relax and entertain. When the property next door became available,

they snapped it up, demolished the dilapidated house on the site, which then became the garden designed by Van Zelst. They also expanded their living space by building a series of three terraces extending from the roof of the house down to the roof of the garage.

"The clients came to us," recalls Van Zelst. "They had no preconceived demands other than a general desire for an outdoor living space that would accommodate the family's differing needs. They wanted color, seasonal change and a design that would take advantage of the overall space. A lawn and a water feature were on the request list, but other than that, we had pretty much free rein."

As planning got underway and the parameters were established, certain details were considered and dismissed — a play structure, a sandbox, an interactive water feature for the children. After a couple of meetings, the clients gave us the green light "and away we went," recalls Van Zelst. They were fun to work with, and they allowed us to be creative."

The entry courtyard that replaced the original front yard is a prime example. While the tiny lawn lined with dwarf boxwood was healthy and green, it was nondescript and boring. Van Zelst replaced it with ten 18-inch flagstones, laid out rather like a checkerboard and interplanted with ferns, boxwood and fibrous begonias. Large containers on pedestals were brought in to



A small formal fountain with classical ornamentation is an elegant focal point for the rear yard. Pink and blue Endless Summer hydrangeas lined with boxwood and white annual begonias add color and textural contrast.

provide bursts of color from annuals that changed with the seasons. A new brick sidewalk, selected to match existing wall brick, was designed with a flagstone inlay to echo the capstones and lintels. "It was important to complement existing architectural components," notes van Zelst. The iron fence and brick pillars were extended to enclose the second lot.

Flagstones lead from the entry courtyard to the side yard, which continues the design themes introduced in the front.



After the owners purchased the dilapidated house on the right, they demolished it and contracted Van Zelst, Inc. to create a garden for their family on the newly available lot.

A classically inspired stone fountain draws the eye to the far wall, backed by a trellis sporting a clematis. Just opposite, the plain brick wall of the house is enlivened by an espaliered pear. And in the far corner of the garden, a square space, set off by a low boxwood hedge and flowering hydrangeas, provides an ingenious means of serving the interests of both the children and the adults.

With its pair of long enclosed benches set at right angles, the area is most obviously a space for entertaining and relaxing. But it is also a play area, and the bench lids lift up to provide storage for the children's outdoor toys. On the third side of the square, a large planter box overflows with a mix of annuals and perennials. Throughout, visual unity is provided by the hardscape as walkways of red brick and flagstone inlays lead from one section of the garden to another.

Several shade trees anchor the plantings, beginning with a pair of Freeman maples (*Acer x freemanii* 'Marmo') in the parkway. Inside the main garden there's a honeylocust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*) and a pair of serviceberries (*Amelanchier x grandiflora*). A row of



Above: With a little ingenuity, a small area can serve multiple needs. The two rectangular benches are a place where guests can sit and chat, but they also do double duty as storage boxes for the children's toys. **Right:** By constructing two terraces, one on the roof of the garage and the other a projection from the second story of the house, the owners were able to expand exponentially the space available for entertaining and relaxing. A small set of stairs connects to house to the garage.



tall arborvitae forms a privacy hedge along the back of the lot. There's also an interesting assortment of shrubs, with Endless Summer hydrangeas (*Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Bailmer') bursting forth with masses of pink and blue flowers in mid-summer. While Endless Summer hydrangeas haven't bloomed well for everybody since they were introduced a few years ago, here they're thriving and playing a prominent role in the display. In our alkaline soil, their flowers are normally pink, but adding sulphur or aluminum sulfate to the soil can turn the flowers blue. Other shrubs in the garden are *Viburnum* 'Cayuga', *Cotoneaster apiculatus*, *Clethra alnifolia* and *Rhus aromatica* Gro-Low. For continuing color from spring through fall, Van Zelst mixes annuals with perennials, often planted in oversized

containers for maximum impact, and changes them out as necessary. Tucking the annuals between the perennials helps to maintain the sense of constant color. Designing a small garden in the city always presents many challenges, but the rewards are also great, notes Van Zelst. "You get immediate results," or almost. This project took two months from start to finish, once the adjacent house was gone and the excavation was filled up. And when the garden is residential, there's also an extra, personal incentive. "I always ask myself, what would I do if this were my home?" Editor Carolyn Ulrich has written for *Chicagoland Gardening* since its inception. She is a former weekly garden columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and has received several awards for magazine writing from the Garden Writers Association.