

NORTHSHORE

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THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

ONE GLENCOE HOUSE SEEMS TO HAVE IT ALL: a charming garden with Japanese overtones and the echoes of a Jens Jensen landscape design, a ravine that offers spectacular panoramas, and a well-designed home punctuated by many windows that frame those awesome views during winter, spring, summer and fall.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA OYAMA BRYAN



THE HOUSE

BY LISA SKOLNIK



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HEN IT COMES TO HOUSE HUNTING, WE ALL HAVE A WISH list. But few of us get everything we want. Especially when the things on our wish list — say mid-sized rooms with enormous windows and ample walls or a lot with stunning topography — seem mutually exclusive.

But one Chicago couple with these exact demands in mind hit the jackpot when they moved to the North Shore. And the surprising thing is they did much of the work to make it happen.

“We saw all these homes with lots of windows and wall space, but the problem was they were huge. Way too big for us. And they were on these flat tracts of land that were boring,” says the wife, who also wanted a house big enough to showcase the couple’s art collection.

After an arduous, year-long search that stretched from Evanston to Highland Park, they eventually found the perfect place in Glencoe. The house sported the requisite windows and walls with the added bonus of a direct path that stretched from the lot down to the lake.

“It was poised on the edge of a plunging ravine, so it had stunning topography. And it was manageable. Forty-five hundred square feet instead of 10,000, like all the other ones we saw,” the wife explains. “But the lot was smaller than we would have liked.”

They bought the house in 1996, just two days after looking at it. But there was a lingering problem: the house next door. Not only was it unattractive, it also left the couple only a small, pie-shaped backyard to enjoy. Still, they put the problem aside and began to think of ways to make their 1987 contemporary saltbox-style house suit their needs and aesthetics.

The interior ambience felt cold because of the pickled white woodwork and light-blond wood floor that dominated the rooms on the first level, says the husband. To spruce up the rooms, the woodwork was stained a burnished cherry and the floor refinished in a mellow golden hue. “It warmed the place up immensely,” the husband adds.



All of the rooms were furnished with pieces the couple already owned from the two previous residences they shared: he had an apartment in a Chicago high-rise, and she owned a house in suburban Detroit. They had been commuting between jobs in these two cities from 1991 to 1996 and finally bought the house on the North Shore after she moved back to Chicago full time. Fortunately, "our taste was so similar that all our furniture worked together very well," the husband says. "Independently, we both resonated to a Japanese aesthetic that was simple, calming and contemplative."

Rooms were arrayed to play to the couple's two main priorities: maximizing the view and showcasing their art collection. The idea was to bring the outside in all year long, since the outdoor space was visually stunning in every season, and to place their artwork where it made the most aesthetic sense.

To that end, seating was situated to look out on the ravine from every room; simple,

translucent drop-down shades — motorized for ease — were installed throughout the house ("mostly to keep out the sun and cool the place down on really hot, bright days," says the husband); and soaring walls in the living room, created by a partial loft over the two-story space, were hung with the couple's tallest textile works of art.

There was also more than enough wall space throughout the home to accommodate the couple's other large-scale fiber works: tapestries, textiles, wall hangings and woven sculptural forms. There were two banks of built-in wooden shelves in the living room that could accommodate collectibles. The shelves, however, were divided into 32 small cubicles that were appropriate only for "tchotchkes."

"They reminded us of a mail sorting bin in a post office," explains the husband. "So we cut them down to eight in each unit to allow us to display more significant pieces." They now accommodate a burgeoning

collection of antique and contemporary vessels and ceramics.

Just when things fell into place inside the house, the couple learned that the residence next door — a meandering and architecturally inconsequential house that had started life as a 1,000-square-foot cottage and had grown into an awkward behemoth though a series of additions — was going on the block. "It was a stroke of luck that we heard about it before it went on the market," says the wife. "Their dog was barking late one night, and he never barked before. So we went outside to see what was going on. They apologized for the incident, then said it wouldn't happen again because they were going to move." Three days later the couple began drafting an expansion plan.

First, they tore down the old home and integrated the two lots into one. At the same time, they decided to create a series of gardens and groves, reworking the side and back of their own home to take advantage



of the new views. To that end, they decided to add more windows to the wall in their den by adding sliding glass doors. They used the same device to turn the screened-in porch off the kitchen into a real room and added a few more feet of space by pushing back the garage. They also replaced a utilitarian blue tile floor with sumptuous slate and added a washroom for the convenience of anyone in the garden.

Since the garden was evolving into a show-stopping spread, the outside appearance of the house was equally important. To smooth out the house's boxy look, they created a sweeping veranda around the side of the house by adding a four-foot overhang made of galvanized steel and wood. The overhang was placed directly above the sliding glass doors and was paired with a 4-foot wide deck made of Ipe, a teak-like hardwood from South America.


Then they added windows to the garage, which abutted the glassed-in porch, to continue the unbroken facade of glass around the side of the house. Translucent shoji screens kept these windows from revealing the cars parked behind them. When viewed together, the overhang, deck and shoji screens on the garage windows imbue the house with a Japanese aesthetic.

All of these changes gave the house — which previously offered nothing but views of the ravine and tiny side plot — a spectacular 270-degree panorama of the now spacious property.

It also made the spaces inside seem more airy, elegant and architecturally adventurous. But these unobstructed views "presented their own set of challenges," says the wife. When a wall was converted into sliding glass doors, the adjacent mechanical components had to be relocated and hidden.

Now the air conditioner is under a glass bay in the kitchen, while the utility meters are camouflaged behind landscaping in the front yard.

With the structural changes out of the way, their modern art pieces in place and the various gardens taking root, the couple can truly enjoy their home all year long — especially since the grounds offer picturesque sights in every season from every vantage.

This includes the couple's most recent addition to the property, an 11-square-foot Japanese tea house built out of cedar by Len Cullum, a master carpenter in Chicago who specializes in joinery. It's a three-season structure, so it can't be used in winter, but that certainly won't limit the couple from viewing their garden from its engawa (Japanese for porch) when it snows. The cold is a small price to pay for beauty of the view. 



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THE GARDEN

BY CAROLYN ULRICH



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AT FIRST GLANCE, PLANTING A GARDEN AROUND THIS Glencoe home seemed an impossible task.

For starters the house was perched on the edge of a precipitous ravine, itself clogged with weeds of all varieties: garlic mustard, European buckthorn and other non-native thugs. The neighbors' house on the adjacent property was an eyesore, too — a rambling structure that gave new meaning to the expression "in your face." And above it all was the street, 10 feet higher than the owners' lot, an erosion/flooding disaster waiting to happen. These two properties had once formed part of a 100-acre estate designed by Jens Jensen early in the 20th century.

For two years, the owners' high hopes for developing their land had been lowered by the abominable abode next door, so they focused their energy on clearing non-native plants from the ravine. When the neighbors' house went on sale in 1999, they snatched it up and razed it, opening up a world of gardening possibilities along with a new vista up the side of the hill.

With the help of landscape contractors Van Zelst, Inc., the owners now enjoy a year-round view from the family room that includes a Japanese-inspired patio garden, a white birch grove, a dry stream garden, a boulder garden, a rippling stream, a large meadow and woody borders. Plunging down the ravine on the other side is a woodland replete with native wildflowers, which is accessible through a series of switchback paths. The property totals two acres.



In front of the house, an entrance court introduces a Japanese theme by means of artfully placed stonework and a selection of distinctive conifers and Japanese maples. While not visible from the family room, the court can be seen from the shoji-screened "garden room" that connects the house to the garage. Windows on the facing wall look over the main garden.

As the owners explain, the philosophical underpinnings of their garden are rooted in the Arts and Crafts Movement of the early 20th century. This movement, which was in turn influenced by Japanese design, eschewed formality and straight lines in favor of a more natural look with native

plants. The design ideas of Jens Jensen evolved from this as well.

Thus, as they began to design in earnest, one of the owners' primary goals was to soften the hard lines of the house with broad overhangs and to develop the two Japanese-influenced gardens near the entrance and patio. But beyond the strict environs of the house, other styles prevailed — woodland, prairie/meadow, rock garden, water garden. What's marvelous is that they all work together.

"The trick to blending a variety of different styles and design ideas is not to be too much of a purist where any one style is concerned," says Scott Martin, landscape

architect with Van Zelst, Inc. Thus the patio and courtyard gardens suggest a Japanese influence, while the meadow includes the owners' favorite plants, many of which can be found in the native prairies of Illinois. "The overall effect gives the illusion that the seed might have blown in, [making] the presence of a designer less evident," says Martin. Still, developing this landscape was a juggling act that required a lot of planning. "I would fall asleep with the design in my head," he recalls.

But there was one challenge that must have kept Martin awake at night. He wanted to incorporate the unique century-old stone front terrace of the







house that was to be torn down into the garden. It was largely Martin's ability to solve this most difficult of design challenges that landed Van Zelst, Inc. the commission.

The site's drainage problems were no less problematic since the house is situated at the bottom of a slope. Runoff, erosion and even flooding were realistic possibilities. While Martin did install drainage tiles, he wanted to handle as much water as possible on the surface, which meant careful grading and reversing the flow of water on the land.

Successful landscape design is always a mixture of art and engineering.

For the owners, the centerpiece of their home is the view from their den, a show that really does have a 12-month run. It's "a garden for all seasons" that sprouted from the couple's love of trees. After all, the couple asserts, for six months of the year there are no flowers here, which is why they suggest Midwesterners make better use of stones and trees, particularly conifers, and be aware of the different shapes and colors they can bring into their gardens.

The entrance court, with its striking collection of conifers, and the patio, which includes stones from the original Jens Jensen garden, are two examples of gardens with year-long appeal. A white birch grove, adjacent to the family room, is another. Composed of 11 towering Whitespire birch trees and a collection of conifers for a backdrop, this green-and-white panorama becomes even more beautiful under a blanket of snow accented by the reds of visiting cardinals and other birds — 70 separate species at last count.

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The boulder garden is also a year-round attraction. During the growing season, the boulder garden is a repository for niche plantings of colorful annuals and intriguing pairings of lavender and parsley. It stands on its own during winter, rather like a super-sized stone sculpture whose colors and forms are as evanescent as the melting snow.

A few steps from the summit of the boulder garden, the old, gray



stone terrace, draped with purple verbenas, offers an overview of the entire property. Nearby, a mugo pine dating from the Jens Jensen era has grown as tall as a mature crabapple, its weight supported by a stone from the same period. In such subtle ways have treasures from the past received new life in a garden of the present.

There is much to learn from a garden such as this. Its overall design is a creative response to an exceedingly difficult site. By creating separate planting layers — a boulder garden, meadow garden and woody plant screen along the road — the designers provided the owners with the privacy they craved. And there are the plants themselves, many of them



unknown and underused in local gardens. The owners cite the new yellow-flowering Elizabeth magnolia, which bloomed for a full month last year, the blue baptisia (*Baptisia australis*), the pink queen of the prairie (*Filipendula rubra*), and the various groundcover sedums as just a few examples.

Although it was a difficult job, Scott Martin says he was delighted to work with informed clients who had clear ideas about what they wanted. "The owners had a vision, they were open to different ideas, and we were able to try new and different things." He says his role was "as much guidance counselor as landscape architect." He concludes, "I enjoyed the process as much as seeing the final design come to fruition." 