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THIS PHOTO: A meandering path leads to a remote hideaway—in the middle of an urban backyard. OPPOSITE TOP: Globe amaranth joins scented geranium and bacopa. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Brian Rankel and Dan Jones enjoy the seclusion of their yard.



Before

See how smart landscaping can turn a tiny, uninspired yard in the heart of the city into a private oasis.

TICKET TO PARADISE

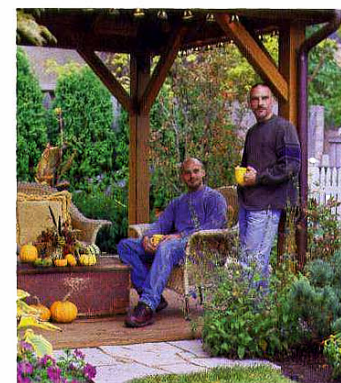


Brian Rankel doesn't pull any punches when describing the "before" state of his Michigan garden. "It was a real dump," he recalls. "There was absolutely nothing here—no trees, just a patch of asphalt."

But Brian and Dan Jones liked the neighborhood. They liked the Arts and Crafts feel of the property's 1920s bungalow and its proximity to suburban Detroit restaurants and shopping. And, as landscape designers, they knew with time they could work magic on the small space.

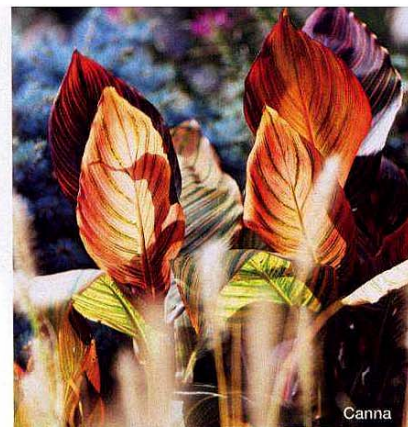
And small it is. The suburban lot measures just 45×120 feet and backs to a parking lot shared by a busy grocery store and a noisy muffler shop. But you'd never know it in Brian and Dan's peaceful garden.

WRITER AND FIELD EDITOR: KHRISTI S. ZIMMETH
PHOTOGRAPHER: ANDREAS TRAUTSMANDORFF





THIS PHOTO: Although it's physically small, this urban refuge lives large. It's designed as garden rooms with spaces for entertaining and relaxing. "Our garden shows what's possible in a small space," Brian says.

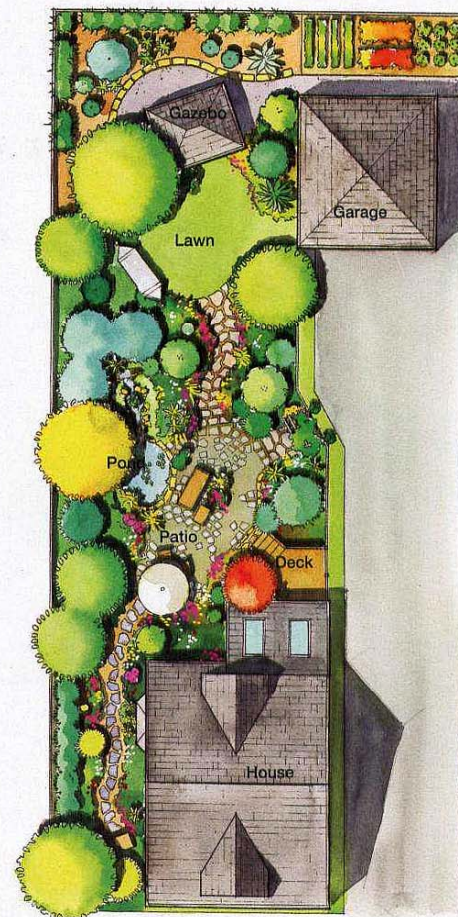


Canna

"Privacy was our No. 1 priority," Dan says. "Beyond that, we wanted to take the garden from parking lot to paradise." It was no small feat, but the pair was up to the task. Over five years, they transformed the treeless lot into an urban oasis that today is the envy of the neighborhood.

First, they removed an ugly wood deck, digging out yards of dirt and a variety of finds such as chicken bones, glass shards, coal slag, and other remains. "It was like an archaeological dig," Brian says. "We never knew what we would find."

Eventually, they dug the yard 2 feet below grade to encourage a feeling of privacy. "We dug and dug and dug," Dan recalls. The first summer, they brought in yards of sand and hardscape—in all, 13 tons of boulders and 7 tons of flagstone and fieldstone. "It's important to get the bones in first," Brian says. "I tell clients that if you just want a landscape you can do it all at once, but if you want a real garden, it takes time."



GET PRIVACY IN THE CITY

This garden is proof that you can carve out a peaceful paradise, even in the heart of the city. Here are some of Brian Rankel and Dan Jones' strategies.

Sink the entertaining area or patio below grade. Lowering the seating areas makes the space feel more intimate and makes it easier to screen these gathering spots.

Locate seating areas away from the house to create destinations within the garden. This inspires an intimate feeling and draws guests out into the garden.

Use water features, such as fountains and bubblers, to mask the sounds of the surrounding city. Water features offer the added attraction of drawing in feathered friends. Outdoor sound systems are also a great way to camouflage unwanted noise. **Screen unpleasant views** with fences, screens, trellises, and tall plantings. Plants also can be used to block views without walling off the entire garden.

Illuminate garden features. Uplighting trees or lighting a pathway takes the focus away

from the street and unsightly security lighting ubiquitous in urban areas.

Keep plantings interesting by using a mix of evergreen and deciduous species. Don't forget about fall color and winter interest when making your selections. A mix of plants can also help block sounds.

Spotlight garden art. It can be a birdhouse, birdbath, salvaged items, or anything you find interesting. Make some of the pieces a surprise by tucking them away so they can only be viewed from certain vantage points.



Before

This small yard can comfortably accommodate up to 40 people for a party. Guests enjoy a number of distinct spaces, such as the patio area here.

They continued to lay the garden's groundwork, designing and building a large pond that they eventually filled with koi and plantings. Then they turned their attention to the property's fence line, where the only existing plant was a large juniper. The second year, Brian and Dan added an 8-foot spruce, a 15-foot birch, and a few 8- to 10-foot pines. "We like instant gratification, so we put them in big," Brian says. "We believe it was worth the extra money up front."

The pair tackled the fence and gazebo the third year, hosting an old-fashioned barn raising of sorts. "We designed the structure, and my cousin helped us build it," Dan says. "Both of our families came over

to help. One of them even put the finished project on his screensaver, he was so proud of it."

Once the basics were done, the real fun began—planting. "I wanted a garden we could interact with, walk through and touch, not just look at," Brian says. Because the lot gets full sun most of the day, Brian had to adjust his expectations for the plantings. "I'm really a shade gardener at heart," he says. "I prefer hostas and other shade-loving plants, but you have to work with what you have."

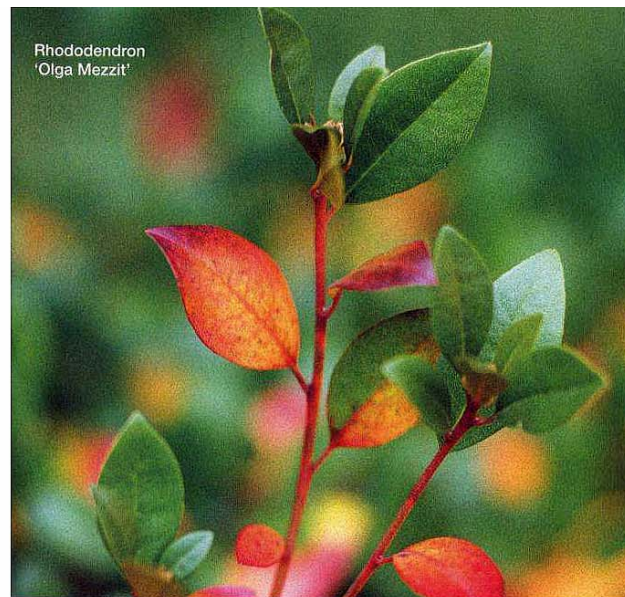
Brian and Dan opted for a combination of trees, shrubs, perennials, and sun-loving annuals that includes *Nicotiana*, cleome, and self-seeding annuals.

"I wanted a garden we could interact with, walk through and touch, not just look at."

—homeowner Brian Rankel



Stone hides the pond liner, helping the water feature to blend in with the garden. Lush plantings complete the natural look.



Rhododendron
'Olga Mezzit'



Azalea

SPEEDING UP THE GARDEN

Gardeners Brian Rankel and Dan Jones created a mature-looking outdoor haven in a relatively short amount of time. To do the same in your garden, follow their helpful tips:

- Choose large specimens for key plantings to create drama faster.
- Use annuals to fill in while perennials and shrubs get established.
- Incorporate native boulders into the landscape. This gives the surroundings a sense of permanence and age.
- Use ornamental grasses and large-growing annuals, such as sunflowers, cleome, and cannas, as filler plants.
- Take advantage of fall sales at local garden centers and greenhouses to get a head start on next year's garden without spending as much.



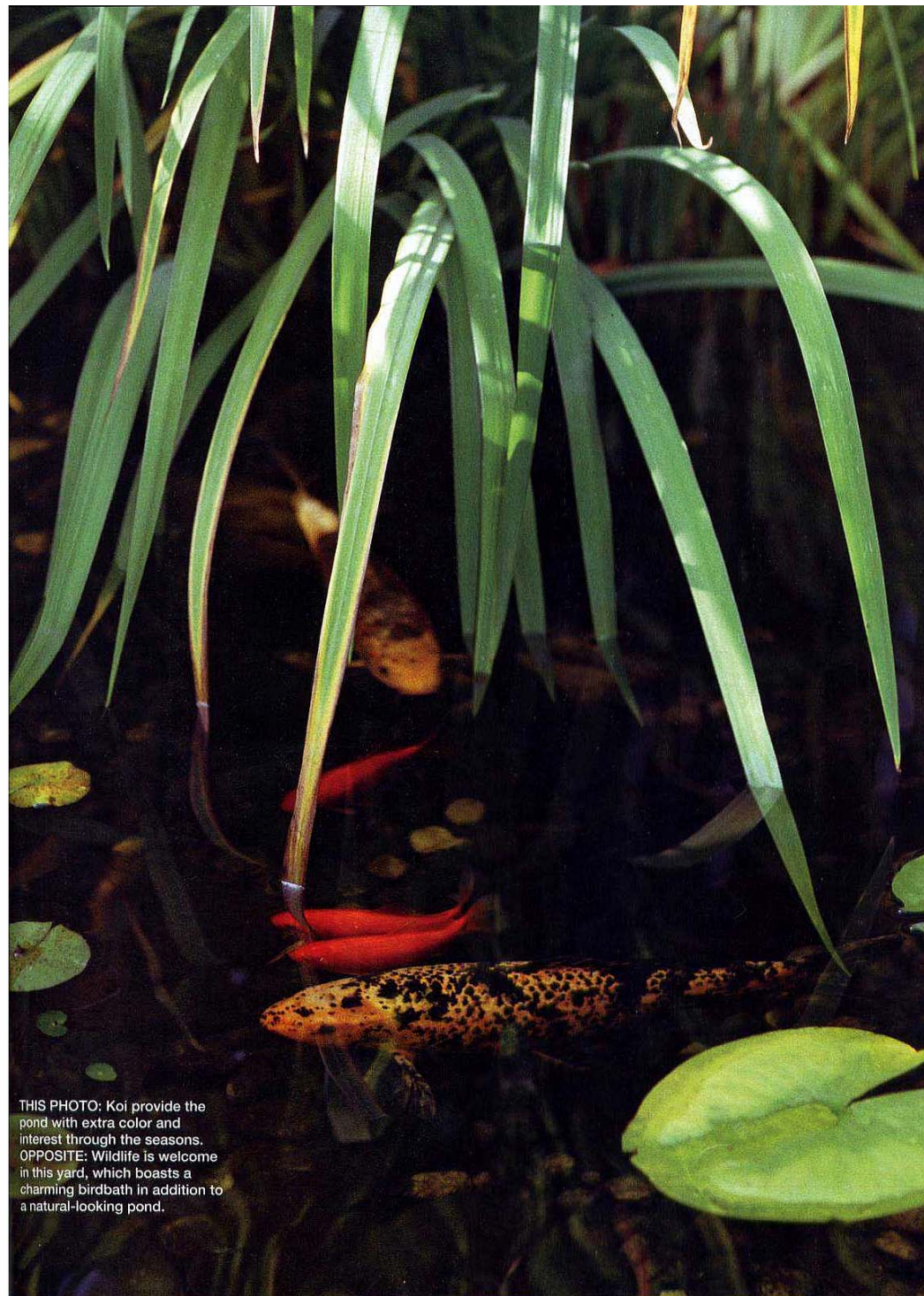
Color enlivens the garden with a show of blooms that stretches into autumn. Even after the leaves fall, the garden retains its charm and interest, thanks to Brian's design. "I think there's nothing worse than a stick garden in winter," he says.

Fire pits extend the season and allow the pair to enjoy a favorite garden activity: entertaining. They recently celebrated Dan's 40th birthday with a party for 40 friends in the backyard space.

Everyday visitors to the garden include a variety of wildlife from songbirds and squirrels to the 6-foot

blue and black-hooded night heron, which visits for an occasional fishing foray. After a few late-night raids, Brian stocked the pond with feeder fish to protect the more valuable koi—a move that demonstrates his easygoing, laissez-faire garden philosophy, which extends to his plants.

"If I have to mess with them too much, they're gone," he says. "I don't believe in overcoddling plants. I'll try a few locations, and if it doesn't work, it's out of here. My goal is to spend time enjoying my little oasis in the city, not slaving over it." □



THIS PHOTO: Koi provide the pond with extra color and interest through the seasons. OPPOSITE: Wildlife is welcome in this yard, which boasts a charming birdbath in addition to a natural-looking pond.