



Trees and shrubs surround the stone home at 721 S. Ballantine Rd. and provide cooling green textures while the annuals and perennials are strategically placed to provide eye-catching splashes of color.

The Shared Pleasures of FRONT GARDENS



Front gardens contribute significantly to the overall ambience of a city. A town gains a particular kind of aura when attractive home gardens can be seen from the street. But as is the case with public gardens and parks, private gardens need gardeners to create them and maintain them. It takes time, money, and effort to establish gardens and for a tradition that emphasizes the importance of gardens to take root in a community. And partnering with Mother Nature means dealing with the vagaries of weather and other unforeseen challenges.

As C. B. Purdom wrote in 1913, “A gardener...knows that while great things come from small beginnings, a goodly tree does not spring up in one night; that what quickly grows as quickly perishes. He (or she) knows how complex and variable is nature and how utterly we are in her hands. He (or she) will know, if others forget it, that the building of a garden city will not be the work of one day.”

Purdom’s words undoubtedly are still true, yet ever since Bloomington acquired its characteristic and prophetic name, the city’s residents have been planting, not only for their own pleasure but also for the benefit of future generations of residents and visitors. Their legacy and the efforts of contemporary gardeners are all around us at this time of year when our city is ablaze with color. But color is not the only element that is important in the

creation of a garden. Form and texture are also essential.

The overall effect of a mass planting results from the way the silhouettes of the individual specimens meld together. The distinctive features of the largest items—the trees and shrubs—provide impact through structure and shape. Because of their density and permanence across all seasons, evergreens provide both weight and continuity and anchor the landscape. The contributions of deciduous trees and shrubs change across the seasons. When covered with leaves, they are softer than their exposed trunks and branches in winter. Texture is superimposed on form and is created by the similarities and contrasts provided by leaves, blossoms, berries, and bark. In summer we enjoy not only the textures of the foliage of trees and shrubs, but also that of vines and herbaceous perennials and annuals that weave on

by **Moya Andrews** photography by **Jeffrey Hammond**

and under them. The lushness and textures of the soft-stemmed plants unite and harmonize with the solidity of the permanent specimens.

Scale is also important in plantings, especially in front gardens. A small house looks even smaller if dwarfed by huge trees, and a large house needs more than a few tiny plants dotted about. Selection of plants should always be influenced by their ultimate height, width, and shape. While it is easy to change the perennial and annual plants we select season-by-season, trees are long-term residents. Siting trees appropriately with an eye to what they will look like at maturity is, therefore, critical. In a small garden, for example, narrow columnar trees can provide height without width, and woody shrubs can also provide structure if there is not enough space for a tree. Trees and shrubs with multi-season appeal are always preferable to specimens that are attractive only in one season of the year.

The design of all gardens, but especially front gardens, is primarily about relationships. There are the intrinsic relationships between each of the individual plants in a grouping; how their forms, textures, and colors enhance each other, and how they relate to—and preferably mesh with—the architecture of the home. Some gardens are best viewed up close while others have the greatest impact from a distance. It is certainly not necessary to understand the principles of design in order to admire a garden. To create a garden, however, and to understand how it affects the senses and mood, it helps to recognize the elements that contribute to a viewer's response.

Focal points cause the eye to pause; color, form, and texture all affect mood. Japanese formal gardens, for example, rely on a limited palette of colors, mainly greens, interspersed with such textures as stone and wood, to create a feeling of tranquility. Informal gardens, full of many colors, create a feeling of energy as grasses rustle and birds sing

and fly. Massed plants with blooms of the same hue have more impact from a distance than do blooms on a few individual plants. Groupings of different plants in close proximity, incorporating colors of both blooms and foliage, have the potential to either soothe or jolt depending on the colors that are combined.

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Generally speaking, the use of a narrow color palette is more soothing than a diverse one, and repetition of similar colors and forms, shapes, and textures increases cohesiveness and harmony in a garden. How each garden evolves is influenced, of course, by the gardener's vision, and whether the aim of the garden is to enhance the appeal of the home or to create some special effect such as privacy, a sanctuary for wildlife, or simply an impressive display.

There are many diverse and inspiring front gardens in Bloomington, a testament to the vision, creativity, and skill of our homeowners and professional landscapers. They add immeasurably, in a collective fashion, to the enjoyment we experience as we walk or drive around the city at this time of the year when gardens are at their peak. Herein are just a few of the many front gardens that can be appreciated from the sidewalk or road.



721 South Ballantine Road

At the corner of East 1st Street, Mary and Rick Van Kooten have a front garden that is raised up from the sidewalk with the use of stone retaining walls that blend well with their home. A swath of green lawn separates the lower- and upper-level plantings and creates both a cooling effect and a contrast with the texture and color of the stone. While there are mature shade trees on many parts of the lot, there are no tall trees directly in front of the house, which allows for the sun to reach the low-

growing perennials and annuals that border the steps and path. This garden also displays a band of yellow day lilies in the sunshine (and hostas in the shade) along the curb at the side of the house. Site-appropriate perennials provide a mix of color, form, and texture in the main bed closest to the house all summer. The house looks quite English (like a large Cotswold cottage), and the eclectic cottage garden enhances this impression.

402 South Lincoln Street

Close to downtown, Kathy Duckett and Marcus Debro have created an exuberant garden to provide a buffer between their house and the very busy street. Duckett is a day lily hybridizer who has developed some special favorites, and she often has baby day lilies sleeping peacefully in their pots along her driveway. She also enjoys growing a variety of native perennials and tall flowering shrubs that attract birds and butterflies. This front garden demonstrates many aspects of modern American garden trends, where natives and other drought-resis-

tant plants are closely inter-planted.

Propagation of plants, the use of plants that co-exist happily, conservation of water, and provision of a refuge for wild life are emphasized in this free-spirited garden. Activity and energy are apparent, and the design is naturalistic and informal with a broad spectrum of colors and textures. Since space is at a premium, Duckett also makes excellent use of containers so that every inch is utilized. There is a riot of vibrant color glowing in this front yard to jolt the senses all through the growing seasons.



The antique brick of the home at 402 S. Lincoln St. provides a mellow backdrop for the profusion of colorful plant combinations in the informal front garden. Lilies grow from bulbs and enjoy alkaline soil so they grow well in our region. This regale lily is white with a canary throat and an intoxicating scent.



Short perennials, including lacy white candytuft, grow together to form a pastel carpet on the sloping terrain in front of the stone house at 840 S. Sheridan Dr.

(below) Moya Andrews chooses white annual cleome and cosmos from her cutting garden. Behind her are the bright pink flowers of a Crepe Myrtle shrub.

840 South Sheridan Drive

Moya Andrews (the author of this story) and Stan Stockton have a corner lot at the intersection with Maxwell Lane, so both front and side gardens are visible from the street. Amid an expanse of lawn are beds that slope down towards the streets. Beds on slopes are ideal for perennials and annuals that like good drainage such as lavender and other Mediterranean natives. Evergreen shrubs anchor this garden in all seasons, and deciduous flowering shrubs provide spring and summer color to supplement the soft-stemmed annuals and perennials. This garden is primarily designed to provide cut flowers and as many blooms as possible from early spring to late fall.



1314 South Lincoln Street

In their densely planted corner garden, Libby Gwynn and Lee Mysliwiec grow enough vegetables and fruits to be self-sustaining, as well as a large number of bulbs, perennials, self-seeding annuals, and ornamental shrubs. They start many of their plants from seed. Experience has taught them the benefits of using organic techniques, and the varied plantings carry the sequence of bloom across all of the growing seasons. The plantings in the front garden are designed to provide a partial screen for the comfortable seating area near the entrance, where they can sit and watch the winged visitors to their garden. Gwynn is English and grows a number of plants that her father grew in his English garden. There is always some unusual plant in bloom with a provenance that these gardeners will share if you walk by. This charming garden was featured on the Bloomington Garden Club's 2007 Garden Walk.



The white clapboard home at 1314 S. Lincoln St. is partially screened by masses of plants, including heirlooms, that create the effect of an English cottage garden.

(below) A comfortable seating area near the front door of the house is secluded because of the plantings and provides fine views of the birds and butterflies.



The home at 324 E. 1st St. is cocooned by a garden brimming over with ornamental and edible plants that stimulate all of the senses.

(below) Majestic 5-foot-tall lilies ("American Debutante") grow close to the sidewalk and can be enjoyed, up close, by all who pass by.



324 East First Street

Plant collectors want to grow as many different varieties as they can, and their passion for collecting usually exceeds their available space. One solution is to dispense entirely with any lawn. This is the strategy adopted by Tom Meador. Every inch of the small plot in front of his bungalow is chock full of plants; others occupy pots on his front porch. The density and diversity of the plantings, as well as the juxtaposition of form, size, and color, surprise and charm the whole neighborhood. He is not afraid of having large plants in small spaces, epitomizing what garden designer Brandon Tyson has described as “the idea of having an elephant in a small room” to provide drama. His tall white lilies, for example, compel passersby to look up into them while standing on the sidewalk drenched in the flowers’ perfume. Interspersed with flowering annuals and perennials are herbs and vegetables, and all of the diverse species and forms are co-mingled into a dense exotic tapestry. Meador’s home is merely a backdrop; it is his intensely personal, untraditional garden that draws the viewer’s undivided attention. The fact that the garden breaks the traditional rules of design is unimportant. There are no rules as important as being true to the gardener’s vision. Meador’s creation succeeds because it is the faithful representation of its owner’s passion and celebration of the diversity of plants and the wonders of nature.



The understated style of the garden complements the architecture of the home at 816 E. 1st St. Design principles such as restraint and repetition are apparent in the selection and placement of plants.

816 East First Street

Barbara Wilcox and Lee Ehman have chosen a limited collection of mainly low-growing plants and artfully arranged them in the narrow space in front of their traditional home. All the plants are easily grown in the lower Midwest. The placement of the small shrubs and trees, the smooth sheen of the massed hostas' green foliage and the smaller, darker leaves of the groundcover are effectively contrasted with the texture and color of the house. Most importantly, the simple, classic arrangement of the plantings does not obscure the view of the doorway. It is allowed to be

what it deserves to be: the major focal point, so that the eye of the viewer can linger on the intricacy and beauty of the carvings that wreath the entrance.

The way the front garden is raised up from the sidewalk makes the scale of the garden appropriate for the height of the home, and the plantings on the curb side of the sidewalk (not pictured) are also a delightful bonus for those who pass by. The repetition of plants and plant features provides a cohesive design for this garden. While it is stylish and appropriate for the home, it is also low maintenance. ✨