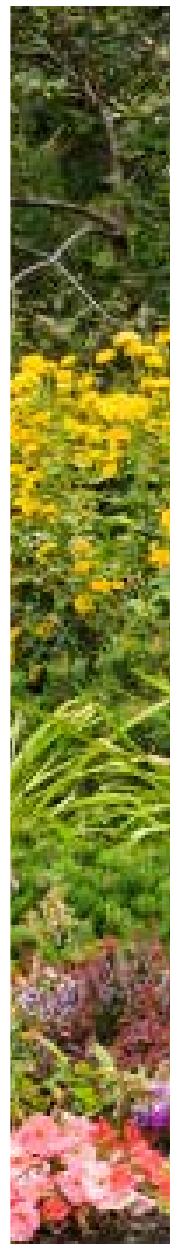


four- season star

A garden designer pairs easy-care shrubs and colorful containers for a home garden that wows year-round

By Therese Ciesinski
Photographs by Jerry Pavia



A

LOCATE THE
PHOTOS ON
THE GARDEN
PLAN, PAGE 91.



Painterly beds and borders define the landscape in this Spokane garden. LEFT: Homeowner Barb Safranek, a licensed landscape architect, chose Sherwin-Williams's Intellectual Gray for her stucco house as a neutral backdrop for plants, particularly the native Ponderosa pine glimpsed here (A). ABOVE: In the backyard, a border blooms in three tiers: plume poppy, yellow-flowered helianthus, and barberry 'Helmond Pillar' at the rear; English lavender, 'Big Sky Sundown' coneflower, and daylilies in the middle; and, down front, dwarf barberry 'Bagatelle,' coral bells 'Obsidian,' hardy geraniums, and colorful annuals (B). RIGHT: A trio of pots with annuals (left) and succulents (center and right) shows the range of plants that thrive in this temperate Zone 5 climate (C).





D

It's the holy grail of all garden designers: a low-maintenance, high-impact landscape of sturdy, reliable plants whose colors and textures evolve throughout the seasons, a place where everything seems to sit together just right.

When Spokane landscape architect Barb Safranek began transforming bedrock into this enviable garden that's compelling all year round, she knew she was in for an adventure. Ten years and tons of trucked-in soil later, the garden is now a soulful, elegant space anchored by dwarf trees and shrubs that provide structure and packed with fuss-free perennials. It's a masterful mix of bold colors, dramatic foliage combinations, myriad shades of green, sculptural shapes, and spectacular drought-tolerant specimen plants that pretty much take care of themselves.

ABOVE: Stone sets the tone for the front gardens. Pavers laid in a fan pattern in front of the house and garage do triple duty: as parking pad, pathway, and entertainment space. Boulders, their impact softened by perennials and shrubs, pay homage to the area's natural landscape (D). RIGHT: A border between the house and the parking area has a less formal feel with a gravel path and a carpet of groundcovers (E). TOP RIGHT: A triangle of shrubs—a potted dwarf white pine, a weeping purple European beech (*Fagus sylvatica* 'Tortuosa Purpurea') near the door, and a 'Frohburg' weeping Norway spruce—frames the view from the garage to the far side of the house (F).



E



The place looked different a decade ago, when Barb and her husband, Mark, first saw the two-thirds acre in the city's South Hill neighborhood. It was one of the last available lots on the street, but no developer wanted it. The reasons were underfoot: solid basalt rock with elevation changes, rising to a bare knoll where even tree roots couldn't find traction.

For Barb, however, it was love at first sight. "It's in the city, but it feels like the country," she says. "A lovely green, woodsy view, very private." As a designer, she frequently plays rock against plants, so this was the kind of land she wanted. "We knew building here would be a challenge, but the basalt gives the region the personality it has. We threw out common sense and bought it."

As plans were being drawn for the house, she stood where the gardens would most likely be viewed and made her plant choices from those vantage points. "I started gardening once the foundation was in. Drove the contractor crazy," she says.

Barb began with the welcoming front yard. "This area in particular must have visitor appeal every season. I don't want people thinking, *I've got to come back in July to see what the garden looks like*," she says. The front of the house faces southeast, the sunniest spot on the property. To transform

the plan

Homeowner and landscape architect Barb Safranek worked with her lot's rocky terrain and stands of mature pines. Using these elements as her backdrop, she added layers of colorful plantings and dwarf evergreens, creating a naturalistic, relaxed style of garden with something to see in all four seasons.



ILLUSTRATION: RODICA PRATO

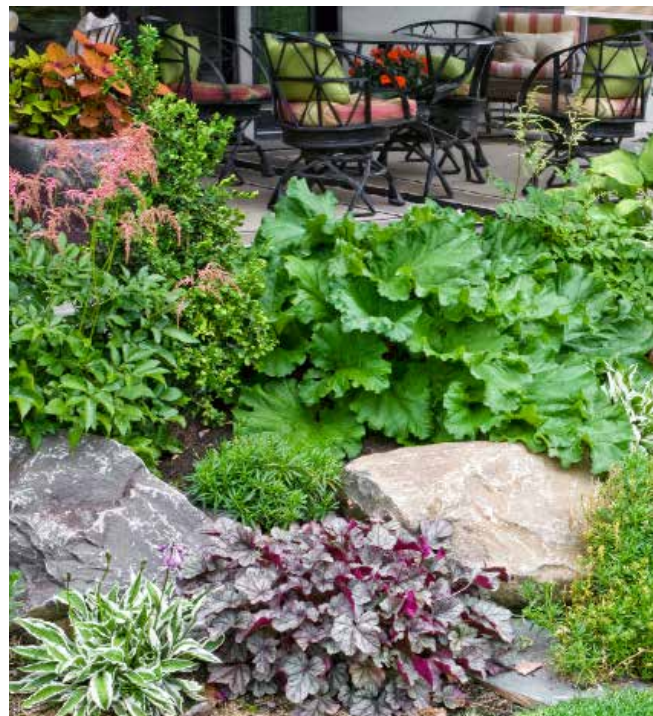
RIGHT: In the backyard, only explosives could have cleared a large outcropping of rock, so Barb let it be. Rather than attempt to hide this knoll with shrubs or cover it with turf, she used its scale to her advantage, creating an impressive focal point. The soil is shallow here, so she chose groundcovers, such as thyme, to green it up, and planted a larch tree (center), dwarf pines, and drought-tolerant perennials, including lavender and lamb's ears. Final touches included a 'Gold Cone' juniper carved into a spiral topiary and pots filled with purple-leafed flax, ephedra, Million Bells, and petunias (G).



the rocky area for planting, Barb trucked in topsoil, lots of it, up to 2 feet deep in some places, to ensure that plants had enough room to put down roots. “A strong root system helps keep a plant healthy, and healthy plants don’t need fussing over,” she says.

Flanking the front and side entry doors are shrubs that highlight the house’s architecture, including dogwood, Japanese maple, and columnar juniper. In the beds below, a mix of flowering and evergreen perennials and low shrubs tumble over and between the large boulders Barb installed to provide texture. “I wanted a tapestry effect in these beds, and to get that look I needed a variety of low-growing plants,” she says. “Most of the perennial plants in my borders are 2 feet and under in height, which gives an open feel and makes maintenance easier.”

As the seasons change, so does this area; the maples turn scarlet or orange in fall, and late-season bloomers like asters and ornamental grasses come into flower. In winter, when temperatures often fall into the teens, hardy evergreens—hemlock, juniper, pine—keep the color going. When spring





H
LEFT: The border at the back of the house is all about foliage; ruffly rhubarb, hostas with variegated leaves, fine-leaved astilbes, and a smoky-purple-leaved snakeroot (upper-right corner). Stones add contrast and color. “For a rock to look natural, a third to a half should be buried in the ground,” says Barb (H).
TOP RIGHT: Japanese blood grass, barberry, and tricolor sage harmonize in shades of purple and red (I).

rolls around, flowering bulbs and roses dot the borders, blooming in shades of pink and white. There’s no front lawn to mow, but it’s not missed.

Things were less simple in the north-facing backyard. Barb’s big challenge there was figuring out what to do with the knoll, a 25-by-15-foot oval of almost solid rock that drops off into a ravine. The little soil it had was thin and sat in full sun. Few plants can handle these dry, unforgiving conditions, but Barb decided to chance it. Thyme took, as did low-growing barberry, veronica, and sedum. In one particularly inhospitable area, she skipped digging altogether and put an ephedra and a blue rug juniper in a huge pot, with two empty vessels nearby as accents. Most of these plants go dormant in winter, except for the whimsical juniper topiary and shrubby dwarf pines, which look handsome when lightly dusted with snow.

Surrounding the knoll, Barb added a small stretch of lawn and ringed that with a deep perennial border filled with easy-care plants, including purple coneflower, coral bells, barberry, lavender, and daylily. “In an 8-foot-deep border, I start in front with low groundcovers, then 12- to 18-inch plants in

the middle, and then plants in the 2- to 2½-foot range at the back,” she says.

Near the back door leading to the knoll, Barb laid beds filled with hostas and other perennials chosen for their distinctive leaf colors. “I place a high priority on beautiful foliage,” she says. “Flowers come and go, but foliage lasts.” When it comes to choosing flowering plants, however, she throws away the color wheel. “I don’t make a color scheme for flowers. I pick any color I like. No flower color looks bad against another—the green in the garden unifies it all. That said, I plant in sweeps of color and repeat those plants to lead the eye around the garden.” Fortunately for Barb, eastern Washington’s intermountain climate of hot summers, cold winters, and low humidity means she can grow “just about anything, from cactus to rhododendrons.”

At least 20 huge pots stand like ceramic exclamation points throughout the garden and on the stone steps, planted with everything from petunias to a 6-foot-tall Sargent’s weeping hemlock. “Once a pot is planted, I don’t waste time moving it in and out for the winter,” says Barb. “It stays where it is.” The thick walls of the glazed Vietnamese containers seem to hold up just fine here, despite temperatures that dip down into the teens in winter.

In spring, Barb happily devotes entire days to pruning, dividing, and planting. But once summer’s hot weather arrives, with daytime temperatures in the 90s, she spends as little as 4 hours a week pulling stray weeds, checking the irrigation systems—Spokane gets just 18 inches of rain each year—and clipping back straggly annuals.

When everything’s so abundant, how do you keep the garden from taking over your life? Smart planting choices keep the to-do list short. “Gardens are both works of art and hardworking living spaces,” Barb says. Every plant must earn its right to be there. The groundcovers grow into one another, forming a mat that shades out weeds. Many of the plants are self-cleaning—spent blossoms drop off on their own, no deadheading required. Dwarf evergreens grow slowly, needing only occasional pruning, which can be done on terra firma instead of a ladder. Plants that struggle are given the heave-ho.

And maintenance doesn’t mean meticulous manicuring. In the fall, Barb lets the garden grow a bit wild, savoring the oranges and reds of the Japanese maples and dogwoods and the seed heads of ornamental grasses. Unless mild weather offers a window for pruning, winter provides a break from physical chores and an opportunity to evaluate the garden’s structure and consider how to improve its look. This is when the evergreens, red-twigged dogwood, and other trees and shrubs with interesting bark earn their keep.

With the hours gained by adhering to low-maintenance plantings, how does Barb spend the extra time? She loves to stroll through the garden on summer mornings, coffee cup in hand. Occasionally she indulges the urge to pull a weed or two. But she doesn’t make a habit of it. ■



THESE PAGES: Containers play a large role in this garden, and Barb’s not afraid to supersize them. “Most plants grow better in large pots,” she says. “Start at 24, 36, 45 inches wide and tall. Smaller pots simply dry out too quickly.”



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all-year color

"Gardens should draw you outdoors at all times of the year," says landscape architect Barb Safranek. Here are some of her favorite shrubs for seasonal interest.

Spring

'Prairifire' crabapple (*Malus 'Prairifire'*) Notably scab resistant; purple foliage, red-pink flowers, dark red fruit. Full sun. Grows up to 20 feet tall and wide. Zones 4–8

'Leonard Messel' magnolia (*Magnolia x loebneri 'Leonard Messel'*) Fragrant white flowers in early spring. Full sun to partial shade. Grows up to 15 feet tall and wide. Zones 5–9

Summer

'Hakuro Nishiki' dappled willow (*Salix integra 'Hakuro Nishiki'*) Spring's pink foliage turns rose, creamy white, and green. Full sun. Grows up to 15 feet tall and wide. Zones 5–7

'Wolf Eyes' Japanese dogwood (*Cornus kousa 'Wolf Eyes'*) Variegated foliage and large white flowers followed by red berries. Partial sun. Grows up to 20 feet tall and wide. Zones 5–8

Autumn

'Diana' Japanese larch (*Larix kaempferi 'Diana'*) In fall, needles turn from blue-green to butter-yellow. Partial to full sun. Grows up to 20 feet tall and 7 feet wide. Zones 4–8

'Tiger Eyes' sumac (*Rhus typhina 'Tigereye Bailtiger'*) Lemon-lime foliage and intense fall color; can be invasive. Full sun to partial shade. Grows up to 10 feet high and wide. Zones 4–8

Winter

'Van Pelt's Blue' cypress (*Chamaecyparis lawsoniana 'Van Pelt's Blue'*) Powder-blue foliage and dwarf, compact habit. Full sun. Grows up to 20 feet tall and 7 feet wide. Zones 5–9.

'Pendula Bruns' weeping Serbian spruce (*Picea omorika 'Pendula Bruns'*) Narrow and columnar, with two-tone foliage. Full sun. Grows up to 8 feet tall and 2 feet wide. Zones 4–7



OPPOSITE: Orange and red begonias paired with elephant ears and 'White Nancy' lamium spill from this urn on the back patio (J). ABOVE: A glazed ribbed pot filled with coleus and verbena marks a turn in the path (K). LEFT: At the back door, Barb sited a trio of tall pots to enhance the soaring effect of the windows and doors. One is a container turned fountain (left); the others hold seasonal annuals. 'Cole's Prostrate' hemlock (right of door) is an unusual but effective choice for a container plant (L).