Post-Dispatch Garden Contest

Category: Amateur Gardener with Professional Help

Entry Name: Jewel Rocks

Homeowner: Kathy O’Leary

Landscaper: Luna Landscaping LLC - Kristen Kuda and David Fox, co-owners

Inspiration: Mother Nature’s palette found in boulders and rock

Design objectives: create a garden that tells a story for visiting children; create a contemplative space with gentle pathways.

Background: I purchased the home in June 2014 to downsize and re-nest after becoming a widow. After cutting my own lawn in Chesterfield for thirty years, I abandoned the mower in the move…having always thought lawns were invented for the idle rich! I purchased the house with the intent of creating a different kind of environment for myself.

The house and yard on Jewel had been very neglected by the elderly sellers, but the footprint had an easy flow to the space. The garden is approximately 40 X 50 feet at the back of the lot.

The Process, per Kathy:

On an early visit to Kirkwood Material and Supply, I felt like I’d entered the Disneyland of Geology, falling in love with the rich colors and textures of boulders! I thought, why not capture and accent that natural beauty? So, I sketched a concept for my entire back yard, designing around five colors. I would have five beds—red, white, yellow/orange, green and black/blue—each with large boulders and plants that matched. And set in each bed, I’d find sculpture and art work, so that when children visit, they could look for surprises as they meander the pathways.

The nursery recommended Luna Landscaping as a resource. On the first meeting, I handed Dave my drawing, pausing numerous times during the discussion to say, “Have I scared you off yet?” Of course, I had no idea about Kristen’s background in art and biology at the time. But at the second meeting, she had turned my sketch to detailed color design and estimate. Looking back, it was a true meeting of imaginative minds! I’m not sure who was more excited.

And so, the work began: collaborative trips to purchase boulders, scheduling around seasons and weather. I was learning a lot, along the way. Perhaps the most fun was when I would find a sculpture from an art show or an ornament from a local retailer and place it on the driveway edge. Then the Luna team would find it, and incorporate it into the design. All beautiful gardens require creativity, but this project evolved with a constant flow of ideas.

Luna finished the basic layout and planting in early summer of 2015. This year, as the first spring, I’ve added plantings and re-organized the surrounding shaded areas with hostas, ferns and new Serviceberry trees. AND I’ve been waging war with more rabbits and chipmunks than I’ve seen in a lifetime!

The Process, per Kristen from Luna:

Dave met with Kathy in October 2014. When he filled me in on the consultation and prospective client, he said "think mosaic and something for children to enjoy" and handed me a sketch of five colored shapes in a simple backyard layout. I felt butterflies in my stomach and my brain (probably the left side.) Gears were spinning - I was hooked. When he showed me the photos, I thought this house is too plain and simple for the crazy, complex ideas turning in my head. I thought this could be crazy strange or crazy good. Little did I know I was about to meet a very sophisticated and creative client who was turning this house inside and out into a complete gem.

As landscapers/designers, with artistic backgrounds and a passion for plants, stone, color and the great outdoors, we’ve experienced a wide variety of clients with a wide range of needs and perspectives. Some of our best clients have crazy fun ideas that spark our passion and our hope for projects that give us a special niche in landscaping. But because a couple of past experiences with very imaginative, collaborative ideas fizzling out as projects for reasons beyond our control, it was with anxiety, adrenaline and apprehension we presented Kathy our finished design. We learned Kathy is one of the special clients.

The layout of monochromatic circles helped form the boundaries for soft meandering gravel pathways. We edged each circle in colorful stone to encompass plantings and more stone, boulders and flagstone themed in specific color combinations. Once the concept of using circles hit me, I couldn't let it go because they created the pathways that lead you through each inch of the garden. Visitors get a different view from every angle with options to meditate, contemplate, dream and to tend, tend, tend to the garden. Kathy does the latter very well!

Kathy accepted and gave us the opportunity to make her vision a reality. For us it was a treasure hunt for three of our favorite things: stones, plants and color. Sitting boulders, accent stones, functional yet creative edging, steps and gravel and stepping stone pathways, choosing colorful and unique stone was the goal. Selecting plants to live in each circle and give dimension and character to each space was yet another dream come true.

The transformation started with the dirty work, the heavy work, the foundation and layout. And then, like an artist’s blank canvas and colorful palette, the beauty came in layers and dimension of color, textures and contrasts, plants, stone and sculpture. Each circle a fresh theme of its own but working with the whole as one garden we all call Jewel Rocks.

The Process, per David from Luna:

Ditto what Kris said ....and this job captured the soul of our work. It was a combination of strenuous work and tedious, methodical piddling. An opportunity to express our artistic side. Creation in stone and plants. Art with nature's media.