

Designing with Greg Touliatos

Greg + Carla Touliatos, are the owners of Urban Earth Garden Center, located at 80 Flicker Street. Greg has been a wonderful friend to Cooper-Young. He supported our 1st CY Garden Walk and hopes to do even more this year with gift cards for our garden hosts, a reception, and other goodies. We appreciate you! Reach Greg at info@urbanearthmemphis.com, 901-323-0031, www.gregtouliatos.com, or his website for future garden events: www.urbanearthmemphis.com. (His garden talks are always packed and so informative).

Q. There are many titles (landscape designer, garden designer, horticulturist,) that can describe the kind of work you do. Which title do you prefer, and why?

While I can be described as all of these titles, I have always loved the term “landscape gardener”. Plants are always changing and developing, as are gardens; a landscape gardener changes and challenges the development of plants and nature to fit his own idea of the present & the future.

Q. Tell me how you chose this business; how the idea was developed; how long you have been in business; your greatest accomplishment; and your greatest hope.

In some ways this business chose me, as the son of Plato & Sarah Touliatos, I think my blood has always run green! I started in this industry full time in 1983, with the dream of creating a new style of garden beauty, embracing environmental sensitivity, and having some fun.

We have achieved much in the last 30 odd years (mostly because of my quality team), but I think we have also become more realistic and practical. I have landscaped Cat Country, Primate Canyon and thousands of residential gardens, but I view my greatest accomplishment as my daughter Alexandra, at 12 years of age, she works at the Urban Earth Garden Center for FUN!

Q. How would you address the challenge of designing for our small, urban gardens?

I think as a garden designer; small gardens provide the greatest opportunity for testing your design skills. Anyone can create beauty on an unlimited budget with a huge house & big space, but to help someone who has a modest budget, limited area and still provide something interesting & unique, is the ultimate challenge!

Q. What is the starting point for creating a functional and beautiful design?

Often neighbors copy neighbors and everyone’s garden looks alike (drive to the suburbs and look around!). My suggestion is to start with a bold vision, which is unique and let’s say it, “Artistic”. Don’t be afraid to use the garden as a form of self-expression.

q. What do you consider to be the most frequent mistake made by urban gardeners?

The mistake I see made most often is people think they know everything, and often don't listen to suggestions. I have a reputation for knowing a lot about rare & exotic plants, but sometimes the best plant for a situation is common & mundane. Try not to view every plant as a mythical conquest, gardens are (and should be) more than a collection of plants.

q. What plants do you think are overused in our area? Under used?

When I am thinking about what plant to use for a garden, I consider many variables. The plants shape, natural form, ultimate height, available sunlight, soil, and personality of the homeowner. If the right plant for the situation is a Dwarf Yaupon Holly (which is a fairly common plant), I recommend it. If the correct plant is Chinese Pistachio Tree (which is a rare tree), I recommend it. People need to both expand their knowledge of great new plants, while still embracing the tried and true stars!

q. What are the advantages of hiring a professional designer?

A professional designer often comes with his own unique personal style and favorite plants, but professional designers usually do not have the "baggage & limitations", a homeowner can have.

I see homeowners who stubbornly make the same mistakes year after year, because they lack the experience, ability to self-correct, and often lack the insight as to why they are failing.

We created the free educational seminar series at the Urban Earth Garden Center to help provide a unique, fresh, and hopefully provocative view of everyday occurrences & events.

q. Describe how you partner with the homeowner to create and execute a design.

Our designers first job is to listen to the homeowner, and hear what the homeowner is trying to say. Often, homeowners cannot explain what they mean, or actually mean something entirely different than they are saying. Our first job is to listen.

My team is both very skilled, and old (in years and experience), this experience guides us in what we say, and recommend. The homeowner's original programming and desire is what starts the whole process.

q. Do you have a specific, inexpensive tip that would help our neighbors create a "wow factor" or dial their gardens up a notch?

When you plan & plant a garden, don't use "one of this and one of that". Try to use masses of the same plant to achieve some cohesiveness and continuity. A lack of cohesiveness in a garden is probably the greatest mistake I see people make.

q. Urban gardeners are often busy people. What is your best advice for high-impact/low-maintenance gardening?

Low care gardening is what everyone wants either because of your schedule or the cost!

The single most efficient time saver for any garden is the application of a pre-emergent (weed seed killer) to the garden twice per year (spring & fall). This labor & time saver is very low cost but can save many hours of work later in the season.

The best way to get a beautiful garden is to remember all four seasons. Your garden should have spring bloomers, summer bloomers, fall color, and winter structure! Most gardeners miss out on the opportunity for fall color, and totally forget about winter structure. Because of these omissions, their gardens are only 50% of their potential.

q. Have you designed a garden in Cooper Young? If so, can you share the address?

We have helped many clients in Cooper Young over the years. Some as simple as individual tree plantings, landscape consultations, individual flower beds, and even a few patios and walkways.

We are presently working with Soul Fish Restaurant to help design multi seasonal beauty into their exciting expansion. We also hope to be able to contribute and broaden the new and exciting Cooper-Young Arboretum at the Soul Fish.

One of the elements which makes Copper Young so vibrant and unique is commercial business component. My hope and dream for these businesses is that they can embrace more active containers, hanging baskets, and really push the exterior beauty of the district.

In my travels I am most taken by the impact and singular beauty that even simple plantings can afford in commercial spaces. I then challenge the residents and other visiting Memphians to frequent these businesses and let them know how important their businesses are!

q. What else would you like for Cooper Young to know about you, your business, and gardening in general?

The expression "shop local" has become so common that it has lost some punch, but as a small family owned business I assure you this is VERY important.

Garden centers have been lost at a rapid rate over the last 30 years both in Memphis and nationwide. The present trend in small nurseries is to carry annual flowers & tropicals, plus seasonal items. While these limited offerings are the highest gross margins for the store, the real community need is a “full year around garden center, which has both excellent products and smart information to help clients succeed”.

The Urban Earth Garden Center was conceived by Carla and I to be a long term, and committed community resource. We hire brilliant and passionate staff members. We stock and sell high quality unique plants. We have a gift & garden store which is better than ANY in midtown, Memphis, and maybe Tennessee! We teach thoughtful engaging and free seminars on subjects which are timely and pertinent. We plant a community garden at the store which has vegetables, herbs, flowers, pollinators, and even honey bee hives. We promote organic gardening whenever possible, yet when needed we know how to use chemicals to solve real world problems.

We hope that our proximity to Cooper Young and all the historic districts will continue to allow our business, offerings, and personnel to grow!