

“Cattle Trough Water Gardens Great for Urban Yards”

by Kim Halyak

This is the 4th of several interviews with Memphis landscape designers. We hope these articles inspire you to create beautiful and functional gardens that best meet your family needs. This month’s designer is John Jennings, Manager at Urban Earth Garden Center, owned by Greg Touliatos, 80 Flicker Street, Memphis, Tn. John was kind to give all our garden walk hosts gift certificates to Urban Earth. Thank you, John!

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?

My title is *Manager of Urban Earth*, a retail plant nursery, garden store, and garden education center in Midtown. I’ve been here a year and find it a great fit for me.

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 a previous life, I was a lawyer, and that was never a good fit for me. I was lucky to find some great garden mentors: Jesse Howley, Greg Touliatos, and Diane Meucci, to name a few. Over time, I became a self-employed landscape contractor horticulturist, and garden designer. Professionally, I hope that I have not yet had my greatest accomplishment. But, a few years ago, I took a risk and tried converting cattle troughs to above ground outdoor fish tanks for courtyard gardens and it’s worked out great! It has sort of become my thing. And, now we have the troughs and all materials available at Urban Earth.

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

That's a great question, and one I'm most passionate about. I love smaller yards and gardens, because everything you do in a small garden has a bigger impact.

That being said, I don't think design principles for a smaller yard are any different than for a larger yard. Good landscape design, right plant for right spot, good drainage, ideal ratios, 4 season interest, respect for pollinators, some kind of water feature and some kind of rock or stone feature, etc, all taking into consideration the lifestyle of the property owner, is the same for large yards and small yards. But, what is different I think, is that small yards and gardens are less forgiving. Just as a well chosen garden element will have greater impact in a smaller yard, a poorly conceived or executed element is more noticeable.

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

Call 811 before you dig!

The first step I is to identify which direction the home faces. Secondly, identify the trees on the property and the size.(email me photos, if you need help). Measure the circumference of the trees and radii of their canopies. Look online at the Shelby County Register's website to find out the dimensions of your lot. Measure the foot print of your home and relative distance from the home and boundary lines of big elements like trees, pergolas, statuary and boulders. Measure the dimensions of patios or other structures on the property. Go online and make sure you understand the various terms describing light conditions, like full sun, part sun, dappled sunlight, morning sun, afternoon sun, etc. Understanding those terms, which come across deceptively as simple, will allow you to more intelligently talk to a designer, and will allow you to make better plant choices. (And, remember, I am generally speaking from the point of view of a garden center manager now, describing how I can help the DIY crowd.)

NEVER, NEVER, NEVER approach a design for your yard or garden by looking through gardening magazines or browsing in nurseries to decide what plants you like (that comes later). Your property is an important partner in this design and it doesn't care what plants you like. Thinking

about what plants you like first will prejudice you against really good plant choices that might be perfect for your yard and the way you intend to use it.

Which brings us to our next step. Write down your lifestyle and the kinds of activities you would like to do in your yard. If you like to entertain, a place for outdoor dining or socializing is crucial. If you like to meditate, a spot for that is important. Knowing your property and knowing yourself are for more important than knowing what plants you like.

Taking the time to do this will dramatically improve the final outcome and only you can do that.

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

Failing to call 811...

After that, not paying enough attention to the soil before planting. Urban landscapes tend to have more construction and litter debris and compaction. Stick your shovel in the ground, pull out a pile of dirt, and take a look at what you have. Spending money testing it is probably not necessary, but having a good visual is important. And, if you need help analyzing it, photograph it and bring it to me. Do that in several parts of your yard. If you are incorporating edibles, consider raised beds. There are advantages to planting in the ground and advantages to raised beds. Research the pros and cons.

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

I think that crepe myrtles are massively overused. But, with good reason. They solve a lot of design problems and they are tough, drought tolerant, with deep root systems.

"Columnar deciduous trees are underused. They make a nice, better, alternative to columnar evergreens, like arborviate and Italian cypress, which can do well in our climate, but do better in a Mediterranean climate. Varieties we often have in stock, that we know do well here, include columnar European hornbeam, zelkova seratta 'musashino,' tulip poplar 'arnold,' ironwood 'persianspire,' and many others. In my experience,

columnar evergreens are sensitive to both under-watering and over-watering, are more sensitive to ph problems, don't tolerate maintenance pruning much at all, and are prone to bagworms in Memphis. Columnar deciduous trees can create a similarly formal look, or create a nice focal point, if balanced with evergreen shrubs, and fit just as nicely, if not better, into tight vertical spaces and small yards. They also let the sunlight in during winter.

What are the advantages of hiring a professional designer?

There are a lot of advantages. They tailor a design to your lifestyle and think of everything, drainage, soil consistency, plant choices, etc. and, if they do the install also, handle all of the logistics and labor. The main thing to understand, whether you are doing it yourself or hiring a professional, good design and install work takes time, and it's difficult to predict how much time.

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

In my role as a plant nursery and garden store manager, I can't do site visits. But, for a property owner who wants to do the work themselves, I can usually provide all of the help they need in the store, if they do the homework that I outlined above.

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

Before you buy the first plant, look at your design and plant list, and write down what will be the most exciting elements of your yard in each season. If you hit a season with nothing that you can imagine excites you, fix that problem.

If you have a small garden and think you can't fit a water feature with plants and fish in it or can't afford it, reconsider. Good in ground ornamental koi and gold fish ponds can cost thousands. But, I can show you how to do a beautiful above ground feature in the \$400-\$700 range that will exponentially improve your outdoor space.

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

Right plant, right place. Steer clear of hybrid tea roses if you aren't retired with a lot of time on your hands. If you have an irrigation system, great, but if you don't, learn to water. Using best planting techniques and watering correctly, rather than frequently, will help your plants a lot, and reduce the time spent maintaining them.

Also, when you see a weed, get it out. If you are compulsive about getting weeds out as soon as you see them, over time, you will be able to spend less time weeding. Weeds that are perennials, spread. Others drop seeds. So consider applying a granular pre-emerge, like "Hi-Yield Ornamental Weed & Grass Stopper", at least twice per year, spring and fall. End the weed cycle.

What else would you like for Cooper Young to know about you, Urban Earth, or gardening in general?

Gardening is a bit like wine drinking. With wine drinking, when you first start, you tend to go for fruity chilled whites. Then, you evolve into the more subtle cabernets, before graduating to merlots. What you like in gardens may evolve too. You'll appreciate the subtleties. So, the design you do today may not satisfy you in ten years. You'll also become more tolerant of imperfection. Embrace that. It is the road to spiritual growth.

As for Urban Earth, Greg conducts informative gardening seminars 2 Saturdays a month. See <https://www.facebook.com/174273935998006/photos/a.233552810070118.53407.174273935998006/1234816909943698/?type=3&theater> for details. There are also hands on workshops: hypertufa, pruning and edibles. We've added children's activities and will continue to do above ground water gardening in troughs.

Whats the way way to reach you with questions?
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