



featured

Master Gardener creates peaceful landscape blending with surrounding prairie



Ed Atchison wanted a relaxing, interesting landscape surrounding his home east of Cheyenne.

Jennifer Thompson

An immediate drop in blood pressure can be felt upon entering Ed Atchison's property southeast of Cheyenne.

Native grasses wave in the wind, young Austrian pines stretch toward the clear blue sky, a lilting meadowlark song floats across the landscape, whimsical garden art – all weave their spell of relaxation.

Raised on a ranch near Carpenter, Ed spent much of his career as a mental health specialist living in various places. This Wyoming boy headed home after retiring. He first lived in the Western Hills area of Cheyenne for several years; however, he found himself longing for more space and privacy and purchased an 8-acre lot about 14 miles east of downtown Cheyenne about seven years ago, had a house built, and then set to work creating a relaxing, interesting landscape.

Laying out the Landscape

The first decision Ed made was how large an area he wanted to tackle and what level of future maintenance each area would require. He decided to have a small area requiring more maintenance at the front of his home and then a larger area in the backyard.

The areas surrounding these more intensively managed areas would consist of unmowed native vegetation (native grasses, a few low shrubs, lupines, and other native flowers), which require no maintenance except for keeping an eye out for invasive weeds. Tough trees would require supplemental irrigation through drip irrigation.

These low maintenance areas not only decrease the work to keep the landscape looking nice, they also help merge the house and landscaped areas into the surrounding native landscape – a challenge many small-acreage landowners face.

The house was sited to take advantage of a natural berm that shields the front yard from traffic and provides a sense of quiet privacy. Ed took advantage of stone that was removed from the building site and had it moved to the berm to provide a focal point for the front yard.

The backyard, which is entered from the bottom floor of the house and is overlooked by a wrap-around deck on the second floor, was the area Ed knew he would spend the bulk of his time outdoors. He installed a stone terrace, a small pond with a circulating pump, and a gazebo with swing. He then added a variety of

landowner



Ed Atchison

Atchison credits involvement with the Master Gardener program with Laramie County University of Wyoming Extension helping him learn to be a better gardener and choose well-adapted plants.

additional stones, including stone benches to the area to provide visual interest.

He then began planting.

Hardy, Colorful Plants

Ed is interested in plants that provide lots of color, are drought tolerant, and hardy enough for the site. He has planted many different types of trees and shrubs searching for ones that provide the variety and color he likes while being tolerant of the wind and cold.

"My philosophy as a landscaper is ... I want color," he says. "I want aroma. I want drought resistance. I don't want to be digging up a dead plant and putting in a new one every year."

With all his experimentation, "I

lose a small number of plants each year," he says.

He credits involvement with the Master Gardener program with Laramie County University of Wyoming Extension helping him learn to be a better gardener and choose well-adapted plants. He says Catherine Wissner, the horticulture educator and program coordinator in Laramie County, has given many helpful suggestions and opened his eyes to some benefits of his landscape he hadn't appreciated before – such as the pollinators it helps support.

Wandering stone pathways meander across his backyard landscape, something his dog, Alex, loves to do. Ed got the idea for these paths when visiting other gardens. He loves the Denver Botanic Gardens and

Cheyenne Botanic Gardens and the way they use paths to lead people through a landscape.

Inspired, he set out to emulate these wandering paths in his own landscape. Strolling along them one begins to note the variety of plants that dot his landscape: sumac, aspen, chokecherries, agastache, junipers, sand cherries, rosebushes, catmint, Asiatic lilies, flax, and more.

Drip and Hose Watering

Ed uses drip irrigation on many of his small trees, which are out in the more natural areas. He uses a hose to water the rest of his landscape.

"It's my therapy," he says. It also gives him the opportunity to take a closer look at what is going on in his garden throughout the season.



Stone pathways lead through native flowers, grasses, shrubs, trees, and this small pond with circulating pump in early spring.

The landscape is sprinkled with a variety of garden art pieces. Many reflect his varied interests. An interest in the West’s mining history led to the decorative mining tunnel on his front berm complete with various mining paraphernalia giving the front yard a distinctive western flavor. The backyard is home to a wide variety of metal pieces, including a sundial, metal statuary pieces, and a variety of pieced metal creatures.

Ed says he is careful to keep his collecting instincts under control when it comes to his “metallic structures.”

“I have to be really careful. I’m a junk person, and I don’t want to junk up my yard,” he says. “It might be too much overkill, but I like it.”



Like all landscapes, his has its challenges – one of the biggest is keeping grass out of his more-cultivated beds. His junipers and some trees were hit by the very quick deep freeze last fall, which has affected many different trees and shrubs

across eastern Wyoming. Despite these challenges, or because of them, Ed always considers his yard a work in progress. He continues to learn and grow, and one of his next goals is to incorporate more drought-resistant wildflowers into his landscape.

Whatever changes he makes in his evolving landscape, he always works for a balance in the time it takes to care for it and the enjoyment he derives from it.

“I believe in saving my energy. I don’t want a yard I have to be a slave to,” he notes.

A peaceful setting, imagination, and steady work have made Ed’s landscape one that gifts its owner with hours of relaxation and enjoyment.

*Landscapes that show thought and planning won’t slide past **Jennifer Thompson’s** eyes. She’s the small-acreage outreach coordinator with the Barnyards and Backyards program and can be reached at (307) 745-3698 or at jsjones@uwyo.edu.*