

Native plants and grasses give Dallas city home a wild feel

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When landscape architect David Hocker walks across his Lawther Drive client's front lawn, he feels like tiptoeing for fear of disturbing the mourning doves, bees, butterflies, hummers and mockingbirds.

No sooner than it developed last spring, the property's first growing season in its new incarnation, did the native creatures discover this oasis of shelter and sustenance in the middle of an urban park and neighbors' manicured, fertilized lawns.

Landscape alternatives to water-guzzling, chemically treated lawns of St. Augustine or Bermuda are a trendy topic across the United States. There are financial, environmental, practical and aesthetic reasons for replacing a front or back lawn with something else. But Hocker did not replace the lot's turf with ornamentals, did not spread a pebbly cover of gravel or lay expanses of flagstone.

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Instead, he imposed his high sense of design on native flora to create a unique inner-city panorama. The design is futuristic (compared with its neighbors) and at the same time reminiscent of the original blackland prairie on which Dallas was created.

Hocker's clients had considered restoring and enlarging the refined, eclectic, two-story house set far back from the lakefront on 4 acres. When they crunched the numbers, they thought of razing the 1936 house instead. In the end, the new owners repaired and updated the original 4,000-square-foot residence, once the home of Hassie Hunt, oilman H.L. Hunt's firstborn son. They resisted making it bigger.

When the couple contacted Hocker, 32, about a landscape design, they highlighted what is important to them: wildlife and native plants. The wife also is an "avid organic gardener," notes Hocker.

Using these starting points, Hocker got to know the site intimately over many visits before he proposed adding 100 native trees to the property and thousands of native plants. The front yard's beauty spot, he suggested, would be a perfect ellipse near the foot of the lot. From the house, occupants would look over the graceful, near-acre ellipse planted with native grasses and wildflowers to White Rock Lake.

Hocker's plan also called for eradicating the traditional lawn, a mix of St. Augustine and Bermuda, and replacing it with buffalo grass, a drought-tolerant native that has been developed into several hybrids selected for different regional requirements.

From the road, the grass looks like a typical lawn. It needs supplemental irrigation for the first year or two until it is established, then annual rainfall should suffice - unless the homeowners water it to prevent it from going into hot-weather dormancy. It is mowed, at most, twice a year. Although the landscape is formal across the front of the handsome, pink-brick house, Hocker planted the design with natives, not hollies, azaleas and liriopse. He designed regiments of single species in precise rows, including southern wood ferns, Turk's cap shrubs and Lindheimer's muhly, a bunchgrass.





“As you come up out of the meadow, we designed in some intentional mass plantings up closer to the house,” Hocker says. “A single Turk’s cap is interesting, but hundreds of them massed together are fabulous.” They provide nectar for hummingbirds.

A mown path in the buffalo turf encircles the wildflower ellipse, which includes more than 30 native grass and flower species. Hocker created a custom mix from the supplier, Native American Seed near Junction, Texas, augmenting standards such as the bluebonnet, Indian blanket, lanceleaf coreopsis and lemon mint with western ironweed, pigeonberry and Illinois bundleflower.

The custom mix, sown over the winter, “is on its first generation. That’s what is so exciting about natives,” Hocker says. “The impact you start to get. To be walking along that mown path and have birds burst out of the meadow, or see things swoop in, is pretty cool in an urban environment.”

Hocker makes the point that the drifts and colonies in the wildflower ellipse of his design happened naturally. He did not force patterns or masses. He prepared a weed-free planting bed, sowed the seed, capped the seedbed with hydromulch and waited for spring to see what would appear.

“We had the scale to pull this off,” Hocker acknowledges. “You couldn’t have this many species and pull it off in your front yard. It’s evolving through the seasons, with the plant material going in and out of transition.” To the landscape architect and his outdoors-loving clients, each transition brings its own rewards: not only bountiful color and graceful, swaying stalks but also birds, insects, reptiles and mammals. From the breathtaking sea of spring and summer flowers and the late-summer and autumnal seedheads to the still-life study that will be a monochromatic winter silhouette, this front yard has no off season.

Resources

David Hocker, RLA, ASLA, Hocker Design Group. 214-915-0910; www.hockerdesign.com

Native American Seed (free catalog). 1-800-728-4043; www.seedsource.com

Texas Land Care (installation and maintenance). 214-350-7799

Plant list - Some of the seeds sown in the wild meadow ellipse include:

Texas bluebonnet

Indian blanket

Huisache daisy

American basketflower

Purple coneflower

Golden-wave coreopsis

Purple prairie clover

Drummond phlox

Bush sunflower

Maximilian sunflower

Gayfeather

Prairie wildrye

Sideoats grama Plains bristlegrass

Grasses, trees, shrubs:

Gulf muhly

Lindheimer's muhly

Big bluestem

Little bluestem

Indian grass

Texas sedge

Prickly pear cactus

Dwarf palmetto

Mexican plum

Possumhaw holly

American beautyberry

Texas redbud

