Bringing the Pink, Purple and Blue Easement Garden Design to Life

Robert Primeau, an Ann Arbor resident, decided to dedicate one weekend in June 2010 to create an easement garden inspired by a design he saw on this natureforcities website. Most of the initial work was completed in June, 2010 in two 10-hour work sessions (including driving to the store to get supplies). He says .... By far, most of my time was spent building the paver walkway and the pavers-and-stones area next to the driveway - a place for the garbage, as well as my little insurance policy against people overshotting the driveway by mistake when parking. For these hardscape areas I had to remove the grass, dig out the soil to a depth of about eight inches, lay down weed paper and fill with fill sand, and then finally lay down pavers and chipped slate rock. Getting the soil out was incredibly difficult due to thick roots from the Norway maple in the middle of the easement. I had to use the axe several times for long periods at a time.

Before planting, I had to lose of the grass. I opted to “smother” it slowly with a 3 layer covering. First there was a layer of dirt which I had excavated from the walkway and garbage bin areas. Then newspapers were laid out and wetted. This was topped with a layer of black-colored mulch which was attractive and held everything in place. I wasn't planning on planting immediately so this method of grass removal worked well for me.

To secure these lasagna layers, I laid a plastic edging along the perimeter of the easement and around what was to become a narrow walkway and the garbage bin platform. This is where I encountered my first problem. The edging, after burial to the appropriate depth, was not tall enough to contain the mulch and dirt. The combination of the slope (due to the Norway maple), the additional mulch, and occasional rainfall caused the mulch to spill over the plastic border onto the paver areas and the sidewalk. I fixed this problem by adding modular pound-in edging, which was an efficient alternative.
After the garden’s base was set, I (finally) began to plant. The “Pink, purple and blue” design which I found on this website was used as a layout template for the west side of my garden, although I did modified plant palette somewhat, using Butterfly Bush and Salvia in place of Nepeta which I couldn’t seem to locate at that time of year. I've planted a good deal of salvia around my mother’s grave, so it has sentimental significance for me. I bordered the area with Dwarf Mugo Pine and a rosemary bush. In time, I'll prune the rosemary to roughly match the Mugo form.

The Pink, Purple, and Blue design (see other easement designs on this website)

On the other side of the existing Norway Maple I decided to be more open about what was planted, but had less impressive results. Beside the maple, I planted some Ostrich Fern and Vinca minor, both of which are growing very slowly. Across the new easement walkway, I planted an Eastern Redbud and surrounded it with Salvia, Bee-Balm, Ostrich Fern, several bulb species (leftover wedding favors), Wild Ginger, Solomon's Seal, and a few spreading flowers whose names I can't remember. A co-worker tells me that the ginger will most likely not survive the winter. I'm happy with how the Redbud looks. It doesn't appear to be overly shaded by the much larger Norway maple but then again, redbud is a native understory tree. However, I'm not happy with the mostly piece-meal approach I took to plant selection. I’m willing to let live what survives the winter, but I want to re-evaluate what to do with it. Most likely I'll repeat the Mugo Pine - Salvia combination for visual continuity.
When reflecting on what was successful and what was not, Robert has some thoughts. He says… There were three notable things that worked - First, following the “Pink, purple and blue” design resulted in more impressive results than not having a well thought out plan. Second, an impressive walkway was the result of thorough and quality work (going through the hassle of weed paper, sand, etc.). Third, adding the walkway and garbage bin platform added unique and attractive components to the garden. There isn't anything on my block remotely like this and I've had a lot of compliments from neighbors.

As for problems, he says... The first thing that did not work was the edging. If I could have a do-over, I would use a taller edging to prevent the mulch and soil from spilling over onto the sidewalk. It was months before I got around to addressing the issue; I was prompted by a citation for having tall grass and weeds. Now, there were a couple other houses on my block with “tall” lawns, but I think the soil-mulch overflow left people with the impression that I didn’t care about my place in the neighborhood... prompting someone to complain. Being that it's the only easement garden in the area, it's going to get noticed so you have to be thoughtful.

The next issue was I should have waited longer before planting. The grass was dead but the newspaper had not broken down nearly enough. I ended with clay clods dug out and flipped all over the neat black mulch. Another mulch covering solved this problem. With a little research I found that I should have tilled the 3 layers (dirt, degraded newspaper and mulch) into the first several inches of the clay-ridden base soil to be a healthy soil mix. This would also
have been the point to add amendments if needed (e.g., sand, peat, top soil). After tilling, the soil would be ready for planting and another layer of mulch to retain soil moisture and add natural nutrients. In other words, proceed as you would anywhere to create a healthy place for plants.

By Spring 2012, the easement garden looked like this when emergence began:

Robert and partner recently bought a house in beautiful Ferndale where he plans to build another easement garden. Since his sister will continue to live here, we may be able to keep you updated with photos. We look forward to featuring his next endeavor. Robert is at present enrolled in UM’s Masters Program in Landscape Architecture so presumably his next effort will begin with even more “hindsight”.

We invite you to browse through the ideas for easement garden designs on this website. Know that the low-maintenance plant combinations are suitable for other sites that require drought and salt tolerance. If you’d like to have your easement garden featured, please contact us at snre-natureforcities@umich.edu