

Warm Welcome

Traditional elegance mixes with fun-loving color to create a bright and inviting outdoor space at a West Little Rock residence

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At Home in Arkansas: You'd never know this tropical getaway exists behind this stately home. What was it like before the transformation?

Designer Chris Olsen: The lot was bare when Robert and Martha Ellen Erwin purchased the home more than a decade ago. They added a pool, patio and pool house for their family to enjoy, and then we worked together recently to update the areas with landscaping and containers.

What did the homeowners envision for the outdoor areas?

Having lived in the home for a while, they had a good idea of how they use it. They love to have family get-togethers, casual pool parties and larger-scale events, and wanted to freshen up their outdoor areas to accommodate all of that. The house is on a corner lot and has a traditional look, so a more formal avenue to the front door made sense. For entertaining, they wanted the backyard and patio area to be fun, colorful and relaxed.

What elements enhance the formal approach to the front of the home?

We chose cut stone to create a path and lined the space with columnar hornbeam trees, which can grow 80 feet tall but not very wide, so they don't shade out the grass. We used wintergreen boxwood to create a clean, square hedge rimming semicircular beds, where we concentrated seasonal color. Summer snapdragon is included, and it's one of my favorite plants for Arkansas because it will look beautiful and fresh all summer long. I mixed in Silver Bells petunias and begonias, which are great because they grow in sun and shade. And we added lighting, so at night all of this is lit. Lighting is important because it adds dimension to your yard and brings it to life.

The boxwood hedge continues on the side of the house, where you created what appears to be a quiet retreat with a stone bench.

Side yards are often overlooked, and with this corner lot there was an opportunity to create an inviting focal point. We formed a path using crushed granite, which is a great alternative to pea gravel, added a bench for seating, and hung a large piece of custom ironwork on the brick wall to define the area and make it room-like. Behind the bench, we planted gardenias for their scent—that's an important element often forgotten in landscaping.

From the side yard, the next transition is into the backyard pool and patio area, which offers a colorful juxtaposition.

While the house is elegant, stately and traditional, Martha Ellen has a colorful, contemporary side. When I saw some urns filled with bamboo in the backyard, I knew she liked contemporary elements, and that launched my ideas. The containers and the colors are tropical and fun, and that matches Martha Ellen's personality.

So while the front space is more formal, the back is more relaxed and fun.

The backyard is the real living space, where their family loves to hang out. It's not too serious, just casual and full of color.

Neutrals are mixed with bright, tropical shades here, an example being the turquoise towels. What was the inspiration behind this unexpected contrast?

That's Martha Ellen's creative side. She's an artist and has the style and ability to blend elements, like the colorful table setting and the variety of patterns in the pillows and furnishings.

How did you select the combinations of plants for the large containers?

We wanted some softness so we added Phoenix roebelenii palms. And I cheated: I transplanted hanging baskets of Million Bells petunias for instant growth and color. I also used lots of wandering jew plants for foliage. Many blooming plants will burn out over the growing season, but foliage plants will go strong for a long time.

Any additional advice for designing an eye-catching outdoor space?

Be sure to take the elements into consideration. Outdoor fabrics should last a couple of years, but the reality is that when things stay in full sun, even outdoor fabric will fade. So if you can get two years out of it, that's good. On the furnishings, instead of adding cushions, we just draped colorful towels, which would be great for a party. You can wash and put them away instead of dealing with the upkeep of cushions. And the lower the maintenance, the more time you have for fun.

Design Resources

Builder **Bowden Boshears Construction Company**, Little Rock, (501) 960-7515

Landscape design **Chris Olsen, Botanica Gardens**, Little Rock, (501) 614-3000, botanicagardens.com

Pool design **Brooks Pool Co.**, Little Rock, (501) 771-1501, brookspools.com

Stonework, dining table **Joe Murdaugh Masonry**, North Little Rock, (501) 833-0891

Appliances **Metro Appliances & More, Jonesboro**, (870) 933-7800; **North Little Rock**, (501) 758-1988; **Springdale**, (479) 750-2200; metroappliancesandmore.com

Bench, containers, ironwork **Botanica Gardens**, Little Rock, (501) 614-3000, botanicagardens.com

Dinnerware chargers **Williams-Sonoma**, Little Rock, (501) 663-3019; **Rogers**, (479) 636-0153; williams-sonoma.com

Furnishings **Ken Rash's Arkansas**, Little Rock, (501) 663-1818, kenrashsoutdoorfurniture.com