



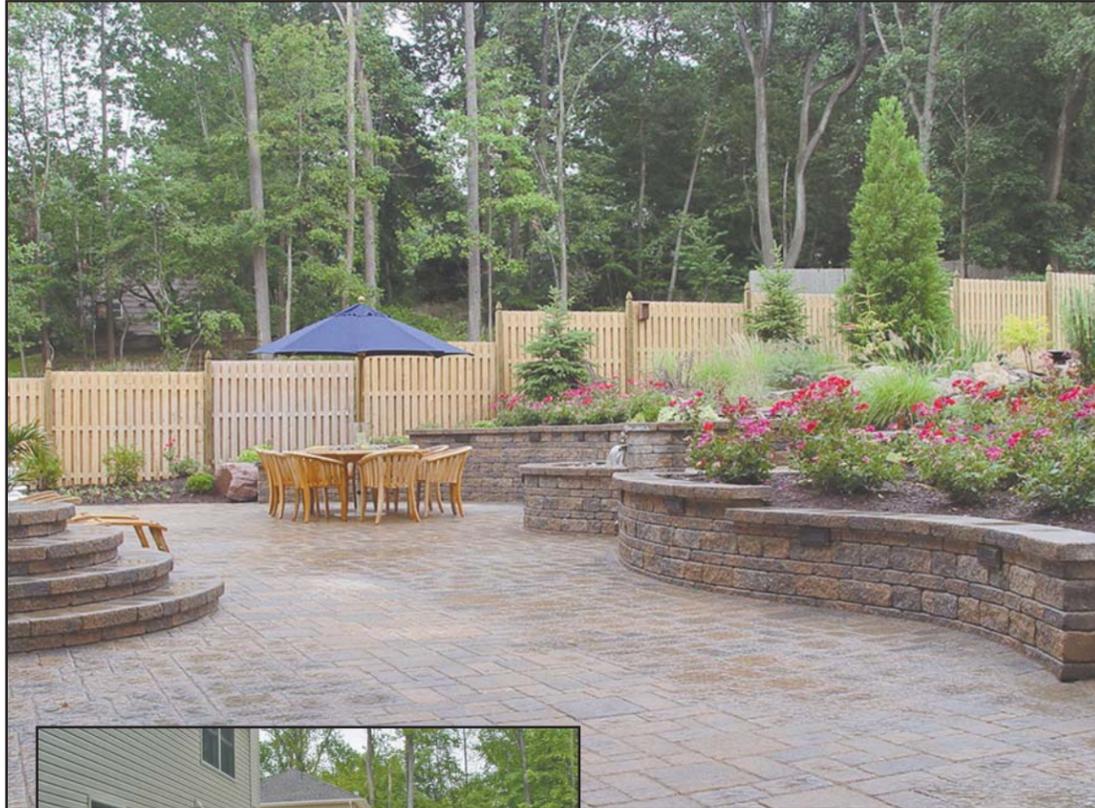
HQ house tour

inside the area's most exquisite homes

BREAKING NEW GROUND

An Oasis in Springfield

By Vanessa Read



G.A. Landscape Design & Associates transformed a new home's hilly backyard (left) into a resort-like retreat (above).

Picture yourself taking a vacation without ever leaving your neighborhood; being transported to a resort each time you step into your own backyard. As more and more Americans invest in home renovations, they're also adding livable square footage by converting their yards into resplendent outdoor rooms. And just like any other area of the house, these retreats run the gamut of personal style and are designed to enhance the homeowners' lifestyle.

Kurt Bongiovanni, owner and master designer of G.A. Landscape Design & Associates in Westfield, likens the transformation to that of a butterfly; the yard must go through many stages before it spreads its magnificent wings and adds beauty to our world. And the Springfield home we toured does just that—it's a delightful, relaxing sanctuary that beckons visitors to sit back and enjoy the many wonders of nature.

Bongiovanni had a blank canvas to work with as the home was newly constructed and the backyard was basically a grassy hill. The first step was to get to know the homeowners well and ascertain how they were going to use the space: would they be entertaining 20 or 30 people; what colors did

they like; did they prefer any particular flowers or shrubs; did they want year-round color in the garden. The answers to those questions helped the designer, Joseph Liana, come up with an original plan that was adapted many times throughout the process. The style of the home was also taken into consideration as it was important for the yard to fit in seamlessly.

Above all, the owners of the Springfield home wanted a place to de-stress and they hoped to feel as if they were on vacation the minute they entered the yard. They also requested a water feature to lessen the street noise. And, as I sat at their massive teak table before the tour, watching the butterflies dance on the flowers and listening to the gentle rush of the waterfall, I did feel a million miles away.

At the gate, I was greeted by the sweet smell of *Clethra*, an aromatic flowering shrub that was strategically positioned there to set the mood. The fragrance switched on my senses and signaled to my brain that I was entering a special place. The wave-shaped patio features tan-colored pavers and, believe it or not, grout was used rather than sand so that weeds will never grow between the stones. For this technique to work, Bongiovanni had to pitch the patio just right so water doesn't sit on it, as well as incorporate a separate drainage system (not connected to the house) for the retaining wall. The wall itself has different-sized stones, each individually selected to give it a non-commercial look, and the structure is tied into the ground six feet behind the wall using a special material engineered for that purpose.

Each stone for the dramatic water feature was handpicked and precisely placed so the water would flow smoothly.



The original plan for a straight walkway was adapted to incorporate this winding path, adding a touch of charm.





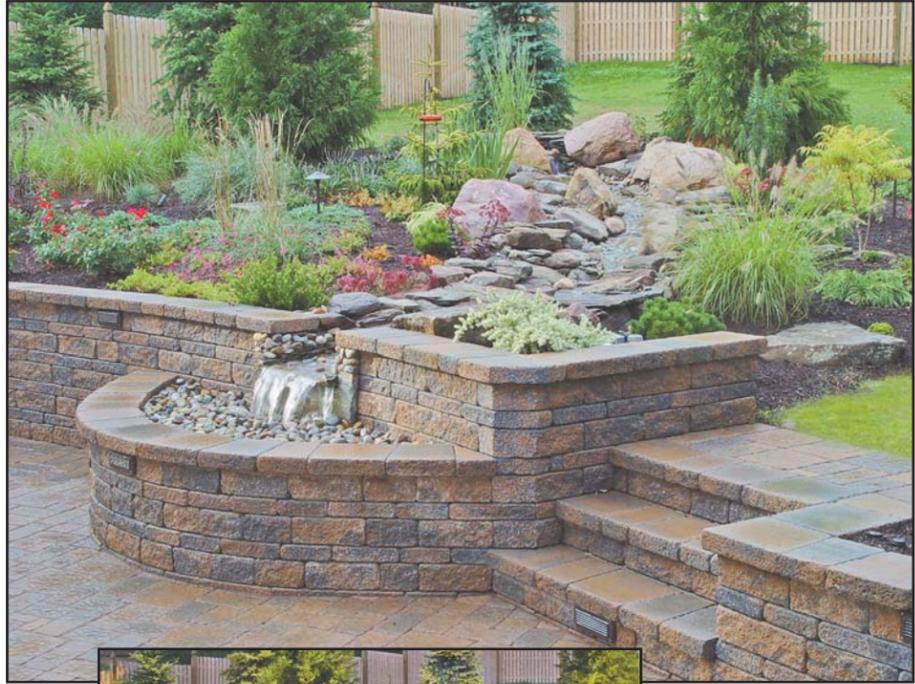
"Some contactors would say it's overkill," said Bongiovanni, "But I want to see it standing the same way in forty years."

The water feature and surrounding garden transformed what was once an unsightly hill of grass into a visual feast of flowers, stones, and shrubs. The entire scene looks like a babbling brook that you would happen upon in the forest, a place to sit, watch the water, and contemplate life. The water feature is a "pond-less" waterfall system, designed using Delaware river stone, moss rock boulders, and Pennsylvania shale stone, all of which were handpicked and intricately placed. Quite a bit of time was spent laying the stones because if they were placed incorrectly, the speed of the water would be too fast, the sound would be too noisy, and water would splash all over the patio. The homeowners simply flip on a switch when they want to hear the brook babble, and the only maintenance required is adding a little water to the system twice a week.

According to Bongiovanni, "The homeowners wanted a contemporary, natural landscape that brings formality and informality together as one." And the plants chosen to surround the waterfall are the perfect blend of those two sensibilities; *Knockout Roses*, *Barberry Rosy Glow*, *Liriope*, *Siskiyou Pink Gaura*, just to name a few. I was very impressed with the mix of textures—the stones, evergreens, and annual and perennial flowers fit together quite naturally. And the stately *Cryptomeria Japonica* trees, which turn a bronze color in the winter, will give the garden a vibrant glow. But the design offers a lot more than year-round appeal. At night, 50 low-volt lights throughout the property illuminate specific trees, making it a twinkling wonderland, ideal for entertaining.

A shed, used as a woodshop by the homeowner, was placed in the back of the yard. To make it fit into the overall look, window boxes filled with ferns were added, evergreens were positioned on the corners, and a natural stone walkway was constructed leading to the door. The structure now looks like a charming cottage tucked away in the trees.

Bongiovanni's expertise is in stonework and project management and he prides himself on the details. He believes that the workings incorporated behind the scenes, like wires, pumps, and drainage systems, are as important as the overall look. For example, he purposely



By day or by night, the water fall glistens and is the focal point of the landscape design.

made the riser on the steps going into the house six inches rather than the standard seven-and-three-quarter inches to make it easier on the homeowners' knees, as those steps will be used most frequently. He also repainted the foundation of the house so it blends with the landscape design.

While 80 percent of the budget was spent in the back of the house, the front yard is also quite appealing. The original Belgian block was cut to make the walkway to the front steps wider and more functional. At the base of the steps, a circular stone-patterned area was created to add visual interest as well as space for greeting guests. Plants throughout the front yard, including *Hellebore*, which flowers in winter, are all deer resistant. The focal points, however, are the birch trees, their cinnamon bark shimmering in the day and accentuated at night with lights.

Bongiovanni, a third-generation landscape designer, only takes on eight projects per year, and he is constantly reworking the plan until it's just right. "I'll be here for the next month just tweaking," he said of the Springfield house, which already looks and feels like a tranquil haven. I guess I can't blame him for not wanting to leave.



A stunning mix of textures and plant colors create a natural oasis.



The circular stone pattern in the front of the house provides visual interest.

G.A. Landscape Design
& Associates
Westfield, NJ
908-789-1859
www.galandscape.com