



**BREAK OUT OF THE**  
**COOKIE CUTTER MOLD**

A focus on creating functional outdoor living spaces can help transform a traditional urban lot into a personal oasis

**BY STACIE CROOKS**



**F**rom New York City to Chicago to Seattle, you'll find them—urban cookie-cutter neighborhoods. With the boom of affordable housing in the 1950s post-war era, these practical tract-built homes became an iconic sight across the American landscape. They have identical floorplans, facades, and, originally, manicured lawns in the front and back. Many of these homes have withstood the test of time, and still deliver on affordability, charm, and prime city-life locations.

But the cookie-cutter landscape is no longer “cutting it.” Maintaining sizable expanses of lawn is not only taxing on the environment, but it's also a missed opportunity to improve your home life with outdoor living spaces for dining, entertaining, relaxing, and nurturing beneficial plants. I recently faced a cookie-cutter challenge. The client had a traditional front and backyard but wanted a space with better curb appeal and greater opportunities for enjoying the outside. And, thanks to a detailed renovation plan, that is exactly what she got.

**A SMALL FOOTPRINT CAN PROVIDE BIG OPPORTUNITIES.** This 1950s era home outside Seattle had a typical postage stamp lot with turf grass taking up the majority of the front and rear yards. With some innovative hardscaping and vibrant plants the front entry became more inviting (photo facing page). In the backyard a novel sunken patio and wildlife friendly borders make entertaining outside a true joy (photo above).



IF SPACE IS AT A PREMIUM, CERTAIN SPOTS CAN PLAY DUAL ROLES. The front walkway of the entry garden has a large landing pad at the top which ended up being big enough for two lounge chairs. The area is perfect for catching late summer sunsets and for waving to the dog walkers on this active street below.

## MAP OUT YOUR WISH LIST AND OUTDOOR LIVING AREAS

Although I'm technically a garden designer, I like to think of myself instead as an "outdoor lifestyle designer." My greatest joy is collaborating closely with homeowners and help them figure out how to use their property to its fullest potential by creating a more enjoyable and sustainable living environment. Most urban lots are not very big, so you need to be creative when it comes to packing in a lot of desired features, keeping in mind the overall space still needs to feel roomy and not overcrowded. This homeowner asked for several outdoor seating areas, a place to eat with friends, a fire pit for evening activities, some shade for the warmer days of summer, and a small lawn area for yard games and the 4-legged family member.

We took a general inventory of the space in both the front and back of the property, and determined where individual rooms could be created. I mapped out the proposed spaces to scale on paper to see if the wish list of areas would all fit. Your outdoor rooms are like a puzzle that need to be interlocked and easy to navigate. In the case of this cookie-cutter with limited space, we had to plan on certain areas pulling double duty. A front walkway doubles as a seating area for greeting guests, for example (left photo).

One thing that is commonly overlooked in planning a revamp of a cookie-cutter landscape is an examination of what you see beyond your property boundaries. Ask yourself what you might incorporate into your view from a "borrowed landscape." Your neighbor may have a stunning, large Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum* cv., Zones 5-9) like the one I enjoy 8 months out of the year in my neighbor's yard. I would never consider planting a tree to block my view of that majestic specimen. The opposite



### | TIP |

#### *Use gravel for multiple areas*

I like to install ¾-inch round gravel or larger in between steppingstones and as mulch. These rocks are heavy enough to stay in place if you use a leaf blower for fall cleanup yet small enough to prevent weed intrusion.

holds true though, as well. You may also see a blue trap over the top of a motor home next-door that you want to block from your view. In this case, you need to ensure there room in the plan for a privacy fence or hedge.

### CONSIDER TOPOGRAPHY ADJUSTMENTS AND PRIVACY ISSUES

Most cookie-cutter properties aren't without their share of challenges aside of their smaller size. Although the basic lot di-

### | KEY ELEMENTS |

**WHAT:** Cookie-cutter, urban property

**WHERE:** Seattle, Washington

**ZONE:** 7b

**SIZE:** Front is 1/8 acre

**CONDITIONS:** Full sun; gravelly, amended, well-drained soil

#### FRONT

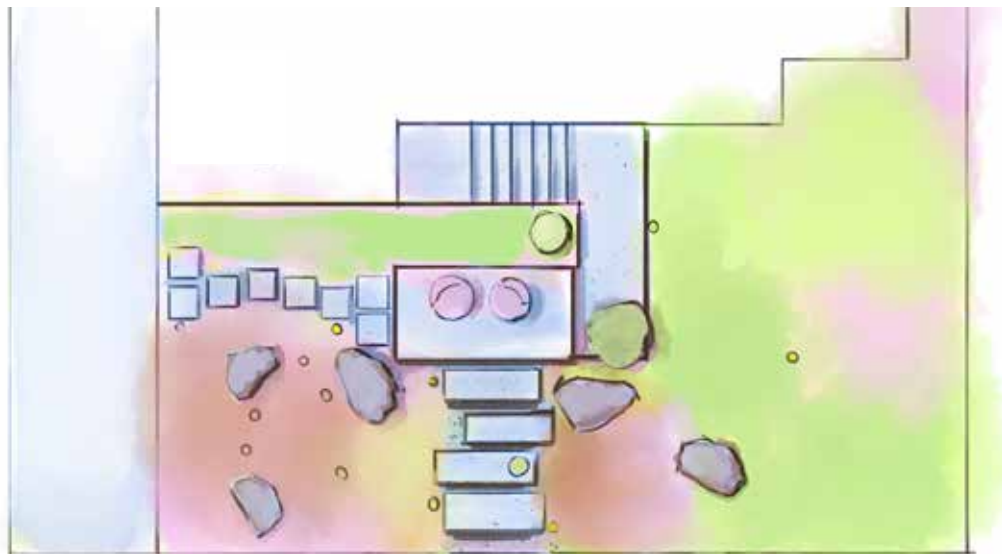
1 Sloped garden

2 Poured concrete steps

3 Sunset terrace

4 House (front entry)

5 Bird-friendly side garden



A photograph of a house with a large green bush in the foreground and a stone retaining wall with plants. The house has a grey roof and a large window. The bush is dense and green, with some yellow leaves. The stone retaining wall is made of grey blocks and has several plants growing on it, including a large green plant with white flowers and a cluster of purple flowers. The background shows more trees and a clear sky.

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With the boom of affordable housing in the 1950s post-war era, these practical tract-built homes became an iconic sight across the American landscape.



**NO ONE MISSES THE LAWN.** Like most urban cookie-cutter lots, the front of this property was once dominated by an ugly patch of grass. In place of that struggling monoculture, a sloped garden was built and filled with a vibrant array of perennials, shrubs, and evergreens. The new plantings attract scores of wildlife as well as curious neighbors who love the new look.



**INNOVATIVE, MULTIFUNCTION HARDSCAPING ADDS INTEREST.** Simplistic pavers could have been used to build the new front walkway, but poured concrete pads allowed the elevation change to be managed in a more beautiful fashion. Each landing is large enough for lingering, too, allowing visitors to take a closer look at the colorful beds on either side.

mensions might be straightforward, changes in elevation—especially here in Seattle—are common. At this home there was an elevation rise from the street to the bottom of the front door steps of nearly 2 feet.

To create a more welcoming (and easier to navigate) front entry, we chose to install large concrete pads that were framed and poured in place. Each one is slightly off center from the other, and each slab gains a few inches in elevation as they climb towards the stoop below the front door (photo left). We wanted it to feel more like a path and not steps so there is large gravel in between the slabs. The area to the left at the top of this path became a place for a larger landing with just enough room for two red Adirondack chairs (photo p. 48). They are slightly hidden by the surrounding garden but intended to still be seen by the friendly neighborhood walkers. This became the sunset terrace, a modest outdoor living area.

The backyard topography presented a similar challenge. The land from the rear property line to the foundation pitched towards the house again, just over two feet. To solve for this, we chose to build a deck to meet up with the existing threshold of the doors into the home (top photo pg. 53). The decking is a sustainable material, a manufactured lumber, which is available in a wide range of costs and colors. This enabled us to turn an

## I KEY ELEMENTS I

**WHAT:** Cookie-cutter, urban property  
**WHERE:** Seattle, Washington  
**ZONE:** 7b  
**SIZE:** Back ¼ acre  
**CONDITIONS:** Full sun to partial shade; amended, well-drained soil

### BACK

- 1 Main deck
- 2 Firepit patio
- 3 Bluestone steps
- 4 Privacy fence
- 5 House (rear exit)





**THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM FOR ACTIVITIES.** Instead of building a walkway (like in the front), the slope at the rear of the property was mitigated by constructing a large deck. The structure meets up with the back door and covers much of the uneven ground. It's big enough for outdoor dining and lounging. A fence along the property line gives plenty of privacy to the party-goers on the deck, but the polycarbonate top allows light to stream through thereby avoiding the claustrophobic feeling.

awkward, unused slope into a sizable entertainment and dining spot. We brought the deck out to meet the next "room" which we used for a firepit. The firepit terrace also serves as another entertaining spot (bottom photo). This area is where the elevation really starts to climb towards the back of the property. By using large Pennsylvania bluestone slabs for steps, we were able to mitigate the grade change. The rocks double as seats around the fire pit.

Another challenge for us was that because the houses are so close together on inner-city lots the new deck for eating and socializing needed to have more privacy. In this case, with not enough room between the properties to grow a tall hedge, it worked to design an attractive cedar panel that divided the upper deck from the view of the lower neighbor's backyard. The comment I hear most often about solid panel fences is that they can create a dark shadow with an undesired closed-in feeling. This side of this deck faces South so most of the summer and winter sun would come from that direction. By inserting a frosted polycarbonate panel at the top one-third of this fence (top photo), we could keep the light we desired without feel-



**ONE PATIO WITH MANY PURPOSES.** On the wish list for this small space was a fire pit spot for evening entertaining. The patio off the deck serves this role, but also acts as a spill over area if the deck is overfilled with guests. The long, bluestone slabs surrounding the terrace are used as steps up into the backyard and also as seating around the fire when s'mores are being toasted.





**THE BEST OUTDOOR LIVING DESIGNS KEEP THE WANTS OF HUMANS AND NEEDS OF WILDLIFE IN MIND.** The owner of this alluring space is also an artist who enjoys painting the birds that visit the small water feature and wildlife-friendly plants outside her studio window (left). The plant choices include evergreens like Irish yews, native woodies such as vine maples, and an assortment of perennials that provide texture and occasional splashes of color throughout (right).

ing visually boxed in with too much shade. Careful consideration was used when we chose the height and size of this translucent fence panel. The solid wood portion was high enough to block the neighbor's lights next door that would be on in the evenings and the fence was high enough to hide the roof line of their house.

### LET YOUR PERSONALITY AND INTERESTS DRIVE YOUR PLANT CHOICES

This homeowner is an artist who enjoys painting birds, so on the side of the house we created a bird habitat garden. This included a water feature which attracts winged visitors and provides a soothing sound for people (top left photo). Smaller trees were planted here with low branches for birds to perch. Japanese maples, smoke tree (*Cotinus coggygria* cv., Zones 4-9), American beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*, Zones 6-11), and larger evergreen shrubs were added for nesting purposes. Columnar Irish yew (*Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata', Zones 6-9) and 'Mountain Fire' andromeda (*Pieris japonica* 'Mountain Fire', Zones 5-8) provide screening from the neighbors but also a safe hiding habitat for the wildlife that frequent the garden. The plants in this area were chosen for the berries and seed heads they produce, which birds forage on all winter long.

Given the homeowner's desire for this newly designed space to be wildlife-friendly, the plants selected were mostly native-driven or from regions with similar climatic conditions. The Pacific Northwest has little rain in the summer (but plenty in

winter), similar to other international regions like the Mediterranean, Chili, and South Africa. We chose native vine maples (*Acer circinatum*, Zones 5-9) and the western sword fern (*Polystichum munitum*, Zones 5-9) for the west-facing front bed and added fun-loving easy-care plants in between. We anchored these entry gardens with a few Pacific Northwest "native" granite boulders, too (photo p. 50-51). Using two-thirds evergreen plant material ensures that there will be plenty of interest and garden coverage throughout each season. We carefully chose a plant color palette that complements the house color and intentionally incorporated red and burgundy plants to connect the eye to the red front door. The same strong hue is dotted throughout all the garden beds (using not necessarily the same plants but the same color range) which gives the front and back landscape cohesiveness. This homeowner is an avid gardener who wanted a space she could age with, so we focused on the plant choices being foliage-forward, low-maintenance, and sustainable with low water needs.

By breaking away from the traditional cookie-cutter landscape and embracing sustainable practices, this outdoor modern-day landscape created multiple living spaces. We transformed a standard urban lot into the year-round haven this homeowner hoped for. From the inviting front garden with a bird habitat and the versatile backyard deck and lower terrace, every inch of space was carefully planned and built to create an environment that fosters relaxation, connection with nature, and an enhanced quality of life.



To see more plant IDs for this garden, scan the QR code or go to [FineGardening.com/web-extras](https://www.finegardening.com/web-extras).

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Photo:



**SELECT PLANTS WINGED VISITORS WILL LOVE.** Purple and red hues are repeated throughout the gardens and although foliage takes precedence over flowers, late-season blooms are important sources of nourishment for pollinators and migrating bird species. Native aromatic asters (*Symphyotrichum oblongifolium* Zones 3-8, top) and ornamental crocosmia (*Crocosmia* cv., Zones 6-9, bottom) put on a show in late summer/early fall to the delight of bees and hummingbirds respectively.

Photo:

## | DESIGN TIPS |

### *Learn How to Think Like a Pro*

There are six essential survey questions I ask my clients before beginning any design project. I find that these can help focus priorities and hone in on likes or dislikes—all before digging a single hole for a single plant. Below are the questions I ask and why each is important to the success of a new space.

#### **1. WHAT SHOULD STAY AND WHAT SHOULD GO?**

Take an honest and careful look at the existing plants on your site. Consider their health and age and from there ask yourself whether they should be kept, rehabbed with pruning, or removed altogether.

#### **2. WHAT TYPE OF SOIL DO YOU HAVE?**

Certain plants thrive in different soils. If you're planning to add a variety of plants, you may need to amend your soil beforehand or select different candidates if they're not suited to your sandy, clay-based, or acidic soil.

#### **3. HOW MUCH SUN AND SHADE DO YOU HAVE?**

It's so important to observe the light in a proposed new garden area throughout the entire day, and if possible, throughout multiple seasons. Take notes on which spots are mostly sunny, totally shaded, and or fall into a shadowy range. Then select plants accordingly.

#### **4. WHO IS THIS GARDEN FOR?**

If the answer to this is "me!", then decide how you plan to use the landscape (just gardening, for backyard cookouts, bocce tournaments etc.). Also, factor in your age and how long you plan to live there. These are all important things to know before laying out a garden that will truly accommodate the owner's lifestyle.

#### **5. HOW WILL YOU NAVIGATE THROUGHOUT THE SPACE?**

Multifaceted landscapes are sometimes easier to envision as a series of garden "rooms." Each distinct area should be connected to the next in some clear way. And remember, the size of the room should accommodate its purpose (ex. if it's a dining patio for your family of four, be sure there is room for a table and four chairs).

#### **6. WHO WILL MAINTAIN THIS GARDEN?**

Consider accessibility and plant choices which will dictate the labor needed to care for this landscape.