

Location: Austin, Texas
Homeowners and designers: Grace Riggan and Joshua Bowles
Area affected: ¼-acre lot

“To develop a garden is an important part of how you live—no matter where you live. It isn’t just that you’re sitting out there instead of using the AC. The garden can be a real cultural exchange—it opens you up to the community.” – Grace Riggan



garden before

Overview and Scope

Over the last ten years, Grace Riggan and Joshua Bowles have transformed their yard from a crabgrass and cement lot into an urban oasis. The house’s meditation room opens out onto a deck that overlooks the garden. Hidden from the road by a large wall made of salvaged stone, the garden provides a haven for both wildlife and humans. Native plants attract birds and butterflies, mature pecan trees provide food for everyone, and numerous cacti and agave species are found along the meandering paths. Located in an older neighborhood a mile from downtown, the garden recently won the City of Austin’s “Green Garden Award.”

Design Approach

As children, both Grace and Joshua loved spending time on their grandparents’ small farms, and they wanted the pattern of their home to reflect the way in which household activities flowed smoothly from the farmhouse to porch to farm. The open-air deck and lightly conditioned meditation room provide both a thermal and psychological transition that, according to Grace, allows them to set the house thermostat on a more conservative setting. The curved and gated stone wall, patterned from Mexico’s walled gardens, provides total privacy and encloses the entire yard while remaining inviting on a human scale. A wide variety of details, from the protected fence-top water trough for visiting birds, to the hand-planed and unfinished cedar plank deck floor, make the garden both an environmental and aesthetic accomplishment.

Team and Process

Other than a stand of large pecan trees in the back, the original site was aesthetically unappealing. Eager to make the space their own, the couple started at the edges of the property, replacing weeds and pavement with native drought-tolerant



plants. The design of the garden emerged bit by bit as they worked; the many limestone boulders they salvaged from job sites were piled near the sidewalk for months before they started to build a wall. Over the years, the couple’s many outdoor projects helped them befriend the neighbors.

“When we started we didn’t really think of ourselves as gardeners, but we couldn’t wait to interact with the site. I started trying to break up the dirt and plant native plants. The process of letting it unfold, learning as you go—that’s how you become a part of the garden, building it around you in a natural order.” – Grace Riggan



Unfinished, hand-planed cedar deck



Landscape screen

“There isn’t any outdoor lighting. We’ve been trying to get rid of the light. It drove us crazy that we never could have real darkness in the city.” – Grace Riggan



Meditation room with reclaimed cypress
Shoji screens



Lush native hand-watered plants

Finance

Although the garden may look extravagant, it was not an expensive renovation. Instead, changes were made gradually, with everything in the garden done out of pocket. Grace attributes the organic look and feel of the space to this slower timeframe.

Lessons and Tradeoffs

Addressing water conservation was one of the trickiest aspects of the project; in the dry Austin climate, even native cacti used for xeriscaping need some watering to look their best. The couple did not find an irrigation system that they were confident would not eventually waste water through leakage. Currently Grace waters by hand with a hose, using rainwater from a 1,500-gallon rainwater collection system. Although its eight-foot diameter tank manages to achieve capacity from just two to three inches of rain, it occupies a lot of space. The couple is still looking for better ways to manage tradeoffs between water-efficiency, use of space, and convenience.

By System

Site

- Paving reduced significantly
- Paving stones on paths
- Minimal lawn area
- Existing pecan trees maintained for shade and food for humans and wildlife
- Plants and a safe watering hole provided for wildlife
- 1500-gallon rainwater collection system
- Rocks used for private seating nooks throughout the garden

Structure

- Cedar deck, hand planed, without finish
- Stone wall made of salvaged boulders shields the garden from the road
- Cedar and steel fence
- Shoji screen of reclaimed cypress separates meditation room and deck
- Gates and landscape screen of regional, planed-finish, white oak, with no sealant

Lighting

- No lighting outdoors