

Sunday



10
ways
to pretend
it's
summer

Also

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Home in on the details

[Garden]

PLANTING A PLAN: THE SIDE YARD

Starring on the sidelines

Some ideas for turning that pesky strip into a verdant success

By **Barbara Mahany**
TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Perhaps, at your house, it's merely the hyphen between points A and B, an unplotted segment straight-ruled from front to back, just one long blank, an afterthought of yard.

Perhaps it's nothing but a tight squeeze between property lines and the dreary walls or fence that abut that line.

Or, worse, maybe it's a tangled mess of overgrown shrubs and weeds and cracked concrete, one you hold your breath and run through.

Imagine otherwise.

That skinny little strip from front to back might be transformed, might be turned into a little bit of wonderful, a place that beckons you, a place to catch the slant of sun, a place to which you slip away for quiet contemplation.

We believe in those possibilities, that a skinny strip needn't be cast aside as a "noplacel" leading nowhere. So we turned to landscape architect Stephen Prassas of Prassas Landscape Studio in Chicago (prassaslandscapestudio.com).

"I've always loved smaller spaces, urban spaces, because each one is a challenge," says Prassas, sitting in his light-filled River North studio, where walls are lined with oversize photos of city gardens you wish were yours. "As a landscape architect you're resolving awkward issues."

The side yard, he says, is often one of those.

"To a lot of people, it's a throwaway. It's a means of getting from the front to the back."

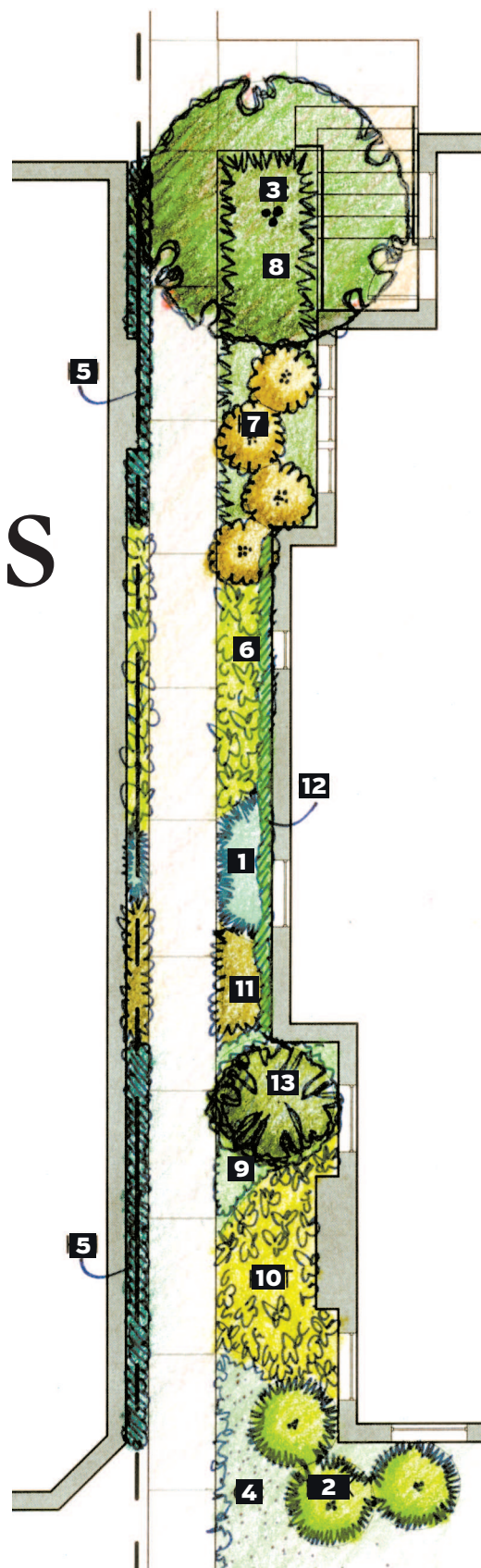
And for a tight squeeze, it's one that's packed with pitfalls.

"One of the biggest challenges," says Prassas, "is that older houses in Chicago have stone or brick foundations. When it's paved solid with concrete, that concrete is acting as waterproofing for the basement. If someone's got an older house, I wouldn't recommend ripping out the concrete unless you want to waterproof your whole basement."

Instead, says Prassas, you might consider a raised container garden. "You can really do a lot of fun things," he adds, flipping through a portfolio of projects where he has done just that.

In one he has made steppingstones into a hopscotch grid for play along the way; in another he has set two chairs beneath a canopy of serviceberry branches, inviting conversation. Or simply staring at the clouds or stars, as you while the hours away, and day melts into night and you never leave your tucked-away wisp of garden.

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DESIGN AND ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN PRASSAS TO SCALE (1/8 INCH = 1 FOOT)

1. Ghost fern (*Athyrium* "Ghost")
2. Chicagoland Green boxwood (*Buxus microphylla* var. *koreana* "Glencoe")
3. Eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*)
4. "Biokovo" cranesbill (*Geranium x cantabrigiense* "Biokovo")
5. English ivy (*Hedera helix*)
6. "Golden Tiara" hosta
7. "Pee Wee" oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia* "Pee Wee")
8. Creeping lilyturf (*Liriope spicata*)
9. Japanese spurge (*Pachysandra terminalis*)
10. Variegated Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum odoratum* var. *thunbergii* "Variegatum")
11. "Bertram Anderson" lungwort (*Pulmonaria longifolia* "Bertram Anderson")
12. Japanese hydrangea vine (*Schizophragma hydrangeoides*)
13. Judd viburnum (*Viburnum x juddii*)



Ghost fern



Chicagoland Green boxwood "Glencoe"

In his words

Some thoughts from landscape architect Stephen Prassas on his design, which works with a side yard that's about 6 1/2 feet wide (a 3-foot sidewalk is between plantings of 1 foot on the west and 2 1/2 feet on the east):

"Narrow spaces like this need a vertical green element, and because you can't typically fit trees, vines work great. I used alternating walls of green: The ones on the west are evergreen walls of English ivy to soften views from the windows of the house, and the east wall is a deciduous wall of Japanese hydrangea (vine).

"I want to lure (people) around the side of the house, wrapping the front landscape into the rear.

"All of the plants are shade-loving with some of the southern plants desiring more light. Because shade plants don't produce strong flowers, the interest for a shade garden is in the textures, variegations and colors of the leaves, which create ribbons of pattern as you move through the space, breaking up the tunnel effect. I incorporated some plants with lighter-colored leaves to brighten up the space.

"Where space allowed, I used a larger redbud (limbed up high) and Judd viburnum but also a dwarf variety of the oakleaf hydrangea.

"The garden will benefit from irrigation or regular watering since gangways receive less natural rainfall than other areas of a yard. It is a challenging space because not many shade-loving plants tolerate dry soils."

About the series

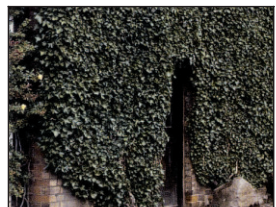
Planting Your Plan is an occasional series that addresses specific gardening challenges. Go to chicagotribune.com/design.



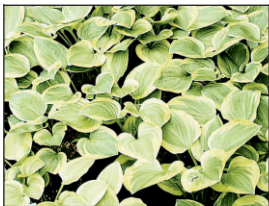
Eastern redbud



'Biokovo' cranesbill



English ivy



'Golden Tiara' hosta



'Pee Wee' oakleaf hydrangea



Creeping lilyturf



Japanese spurge



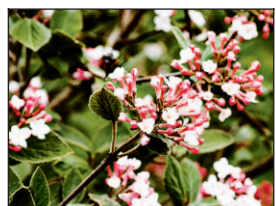
Variegated Solomon's seal



'Bertram Anderson' lungwort



Japanese hydrangea vine



Judd viburnum

The skinny on the strip

Some points to consider in your skinny little strip:

■ Ask yourself how much you use it. Is it a place you need to walk through every day? Will you need to shovel it in winter? Can you get a hose in there in summer? Is it purely utilitarian, your path for taking out the trash? Or might it be a viewing garden you look into from inside the house?

■ It's all about the vertical. Because you can't stretch out, stretch up. Vines are one way of adding a layer of lushness. ("You don't need much Boston ivy," says landscape architect Stephen Prassas, to get a wall of green.)

■ Consider architectural solutions, a pergola or arch, to create a sense of enclosure, to draw you into the space.

■ Know this about rain: It never falls straight down, so every house has what's called a "rain shadow," an area around the house that never gets much rain. Your skinny garden might be drier than other places in your yard. So what you've got is a dry, shady garden, which can be a bit of a challenge. Your plant palette is narrowed, but Prassas' plant list is rich in great choices.

■ Because your plant list is limited, and there won't be lots of color, you'll want to pay more attention to textures, and shapes of leaves.

■ Space is limited, so be sure to look at dwarf versions of trees or shrubs. Pay attention to how big a plant will someday grow, not its size the day you plant it.

■ Remember that soils up close to the house are the ones that have been most disturbed by construction and might need a few years of serious amending. But don't lose hope. Your garden will reward your efforts. In the short term, containers might be a fine solution because you can fill them every year with top-grade potting soil.

— B.M.

Treat your yard to a private screening

By Laurie Casey

SPECIAL TO TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Want more privacy around your patio? Need to beautify your view? Use trees as living fences or screens. Choose trees with slim profiles, said Todd Jacobson, head of horticulture at The Morton Arboretum.

"If you (factor in) the tree's eventual mature size, it won't likely overtake adjacent structures, such as buildings or utility lines, which will save you a lot of pruning in the long run," he said.

In confined areas like side yards, measure the space and subtract 5 feet (for room to maintain the tree or nearby structures). That gives you the maximum mature width to look for in a tree. As always, match the tree's growing needs to the space's light and soil conditions.

Here are some of Jacobson's favorite cultivars that are more compact and upright compared with the straight species.

Among ornamental trees, "J. N. Upright" American hornbeam — Firespire (*Carpinus caroliniana* "J.N. Upright," 10-foot width, 20-foot height; available at Johnson's Nursery in Menomonee Falls, Wis.) is "an exciting new selection that has lived up to its billing with fantastic orange and bright red fall color," he said.

Vase-shape Pink Flair Sargent cherry



For good, year-round screening, choose an upright evergreen such as this Fairview Chinese juniper. **MORTON ARBORETUM PHOTO**

(*Prunus sargentii* "JFS-KW58", 15-foot width, 25-foot height) blooms bright pink in April and turns orange-red in fall.

Jacobson uses evergreen trees to provide year-round screening. Good choices include "Fairview" Chinese juniper (*Juniperus chinensis* "Fairview," 10-foot width, 15-foot height) and "Vanderwolf's Pyramid" limber pine (*Pinus flexilis* "Vanderwolf's Pyramid," 15-foot width, 30-foot height).

Narrow shade trees, such as "Shawnee Brave" baldcypress (*Taxodium distichum* "Shawnee Brave," 15- to 20-foot width, 70- to 75-foot height) can block larger views. Princeton Sentry ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba* "Princeton Sentry," 25-foot width, 60-foot height) "is a male selection, so there's no smelly fruit to deal with, and has brilliant yellow-gold fall color," said Jacobson.

Laurie Casey is a staff writer at The Morton Arboretum in Lisle (mortonarb.org).

Q&A

Moth orchid TLC

Q We have a moth orchid that lost its flowers some time back. What kind of care does it need to flower again? It started producing shoots that bent downward toward the soil. One shoot, though, is above a leaf and is growing lying on the leaf. We cut some of the original stem when it lost its flowers.

— Krys Skorka, Willowbrook

A Phalaenopsis, or moth, orchids are some of the easiest orchids to care for. The normal bloom time is late winter to early spring. Often you can urge a second flowering from each spike with a timely pruning. When the last flower of the spike fades, examine the spike, looking for small fleshy bumps or nodes. Count only the green fleshy nodes; ignore any that are dried out. From the base of the spike, count out three nodes. Cut the spike 1 inch above the third node.

If your plant is healthy and it is not too late in the bloom season, this should wake up one or two nodes to produce a new spray of fresh blooms. From the top node, a flower stem should emerge within a few months. If there is no response or the flower spike turns brown, cut it off near the base of the plant where it emerged.

Moth orchids prefer a warm environ-

ment (70 to 80 degrees in the day, 62 to 65 degrees at night) similar to the range in many homes. Indirect light is best — bright but not direct sunlight.

Water your moth orchid when the planting mix is close to dry, about once every four to seven days. Water early in the morning and use rainwater or distilled water, not water softened by a water softener (which can harm the plant). The plants should never stand in water, but they also should never completely dry out.

The chunky, bark-based potting medium for orchids breaks down after about a year, and needs to be replaced. Spring or fall is the best time to repot; mild temperatures reduce transplant shock. Use a medium-grade orchid bark mix in pots that are 5 or more inches in diameter.

Feed the moth orchid with a diluted water-soluble fertilizer each time you water during the growing season. In the winter months, use a diluted fertilizer at every third watering.

The shoots you describe are likely aerial roots, not stems.

Several factors could contribute to your moth orchid not flowering. The room could be too hot; the light level is too low; or the plants are being kept too dry or too wet (a common problem).

E-mail questions to Tim Johnson, director of horticulture for the Chicago Botanic Garden, to sunday@tribune.com.

Get the picture

Google Images will provide plenty of photographs of these plants, but for growing information on these, and hundreds more, as well as great gardening advice, check out these websites:

■ Chicago Botanic Garden: chicagobotanic.org

■ The Morton Arboretum: mortonarb.org

■ University of Illinois Extension: urbanext.illinois.edu/hort

■ Missouri Botanical Garden: mobot.org