

A woman with short, white hair is seated on a wicker chair with a black frame, positioned on a stone patio. She is wearing a dark grey, textured zip-up jacket over a light blue shirt. To her left is a multi-tiered stone waterfall cascading over large, dark rocks. To her right is a tall, cylindrical stone pizza oven. The background features a green lawn, a wire fence, and a field with several horses grazing. In the distance, rolling hills and mountains are visible under a cloudy sky.

Martha Diaz and John Mathai worked with Montana Ponds to install a waterfall and a pizza oven in their back yard near Silver Star.



BACKYARD SANCTUARIES

*Feed your soul and enhance your
surroundings, no matter your address*

BY ALAN KESSELHEIM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

WHILE SNOW BLANKETS THE YARD, we meet each morning in the living room. It's still dark and cold outside, but we leave the lights out, cradle hot mugs of coffee, find our favorite chairs. While the night shades towards gray dawn, we contemplate together. We don't talk much. We each, in our way, greet the new day and express gratitude to be around for it. It's a sweet interlude before life and its demands encroach.

As soon as the snow melts, and for as long as we can persevere into the fall, we do the same thing outside. Mind you, we live two blocks off of Main Street in Bozeman. As nature preserves go, it's pretty urban. Still, over the decades we've owned our home, we've slowly created a space that feels undeniably like a sanctuary. Some friends even refer to it as sacred. That might go a bit far, but there's some of that.

What was nothing but weedy lawn and a couple of ash trees when we bought the house, now boasts an aspen grove, flower beds, raised garden beds, a fire pit, a small pond, bird feeders, a composting box, fruit trees, sagebrush. It has shade in the summer, sunny spots for cooler weather, an old metal lawn chair set in the midst of the aspen grove, all surrounded by a hedge. Downtown may be in earshot, but the yard feels calm and centered and soothing.

We step out the back door, find our spots, listen to the rustle of leaves, watch the birds come to the pond or the feeders, let the sunrise brighten the air. It is an interlude in each day that feels like church, and an environment that invites in all the life that doesn't have the luxury of escaping town. We get deer, rabbits, ducks, skunks,

sharp-shinned hawks, all manner of resident and migrating birds, simply because we have a few basic amenities to offer—shelter, food, water.

We are not alone. The business of turning settled land into more natural and productive property is something of a movement, whether it's rooftop gardens in Manhattan, vertical garden walls in Jackson Hole, or folks creating pleasing natural habitat around their homes. Even in a landscape like Montana, where we boast about our skies and space and access to wild country, there is something ultimately soothing and satisfying about being surrounded by nature in the midst of settlement.

That proximity has the added benefit of connecting us to the larger world. When warblers flock the feeders each spring, we think of their journeys, their challenges, the time of year. When hummingbirds hover over flowers, we marvel at the engines that power them and the fuel they require to survive. When we think about what to plant along the fence, it ties us to everything from seasons to elevation, from sunlight to soil. Two blocks off Main, yes, but thinking like farmers.

Enhancing small-scale habitat is a theme promoted by nonprofit and government agencies around the country. Fish and wildlife agencies, the National Wildlife Federation, Montana Department of Natural Resources, Audubon all have programs devoted to promoting habitat, certifying natural landscapes, conservation easements, tree-planting programs, stream restoration, and highlighting native plants.

Given climate concerns and the growing menace of wildfires, particularly in the West, landowners have to be cautious about overdoing the wild tangle. A yard full of dead snags and thickets of underbrush adjacent to buildings may attract wildlife, but could also present a real danger. Montana DNRC recommends pruning overhanging branches and brush away from buildings, and planting a variety of natural vegetation with an eye toward fire-resistant species. Sixteen DNRC service foresters around the state provide specific advice to landowners about safe practices in a fire-prone region.

Chuck Barone, one of DNRC's service foresters, highlights properties that sit on the "urban/wildland" interface as being of the greatest concern. "I'm available for any landowner, but I work most commonly with plots of at least five acres that border backcountry. That boundary between settled space and wild space has the greatest potential for fire danger."

"It's always a compromise," he admits. "People usually



Above: Elizabeth Scholl and Bob Degenhardt built a gambrel-roofed barn east of Livingston on an old dairy farm with views of the Crazy Mountains, the Absarokas, and the Bridgers.

Right: Greg Johnson says that it's much easier to add a water feature to a Montana property than it is to buy a waterfront property.

don't want to cut down trees or clear a defensible space, but even if they are willing to do a little bit, it makes a difference."

Greg Johnson has been navigating this stuff for decades. His company, Montana Ponds, specializes in transforming properties into environments that both soothe the residents and invite guests of all stripes. In the beginning, for Johnson, it was all about frogs.

Johnson has cobbled together a decades-long career out of trail-building, landscaping, and more recently, ponds and water features. He earned a college degree in landscape design, followed by a stint in the Peace Corps.



He spent years building trails and taking on a variety of landscaping, but through all of that he kept being drawn to water.

“Ponds fascinate me,” he says. “I have always liked frogs. I wanted to build places for my frogs.”

He approaches his projects with the eye of a surveyor and the sensibility of a naturalist. “It’s hard to say what I do,” he admits. “It’s a little like playing God. I usually talk to people and get a feel for what they want, and then make a really rough sketch, like on a napkin. I almost always try to put the water closer in than they think they want, and they always say later that they are glad I did.”

Most of Johnson’s projects highlight water—ponds, recirculating streams and waterfalls, and beaches. “Waterfront property is really expensive,” he says. “It’s usually cheaper to bring water to you.” He encourages people to interact with the features, to swim in the ponds and wade in the shallows, to spend time outside and notice things.

“So many people watch television,” he says. “But when you’ve got tadpoles growing and plants blooming and birds in the fruit trees, you start paying attention, looking stuff up, making connections.”

While water resides at the center of his schemes, Johnson adds berms for topographic relief and vegetation such as fruit trees and honeyberries. The vegetation helps filter impurities out of the water and draws in birds and animals.

“People are always pulled in,” he stresses. “I try and make it look like it’s always been there, like it fits the landscape. You can swim in an actual living pond with no chlorine. Once the pond is there, people go to it every day. Their kids play in the rocks and shallows.”

“Big lawns are out of fashion,” Johnson claims. “Who wants to mow all the time? Who wants pesticides? And ponds actually require less water than lawn sprinklers. Anymore, yards are boring.

“People may not know it, but everyone is yearning for that bit of sanctuary around them. Once they have it, they can’t imagine life without it.”

John Mathai and Martha Diaz live outside of Silver Star near the Jefferson River. Their backyard project grew out of a suggestion Johnson made when they were on a hike together. “I pointed out a really sweet little waterfall off the trail,” Diaz remembers. “Greg said, ‘I could do that.’”

Later, Johnson stopped by with a rough sketch on a



napkin. In the five years since, Diaz and Mathai have been tinkering with making it happen, bit by bit. In a compact space off of their patio, they have a small recirculating waterfall (as promised), a stone pizza oven made out of local river rock, several low berms and a smattering of metal sculptures and strings of lights.

“It was all pretty unplanned,” says Mathai. Over time they keep adding touches, planting mint and yarrow, some fruit trees, sage. “Once we had fruit suddenly we had moose around. Birds come for the water. Everyone comments on the water.”

Diaz finds solace whether she’s inside or out. She washes dishes with an eye for bird activity. “That’s my frame on the world,” she says. At night they leave the windows open so they can hear the sound of the water, the rustling of trees. And it’s social space as well, as when they host periodic pizza parties for the neighborhood.

For Elizabeth Schuyler Scholl and Bob Degenhardt, living at the end of the Absaroka Range east of Livingston, the landscape they have created is integral to their survival in a literal sense. Scholl suffers from a

debilitating illness that leaves her bedridden for extended periods, and she is almost always in pain. For her, the landscape they have surrounded themselves with is life saving.

They purchased a 10-acre inholding on a large ranch. At the time it had a dilapidated trailer house, a shaky cinder-block barn, and a ranch dump filled with barbed wire, junked snowmobiles and old sinks. But it has a hell of a view of the Bridgers to the west, the Crazies and Yellowstone River to the north, and into a mountainous southern wilderness that doesn’t stop until it hits Jackson Hole. That, combined with water rights and a couple of wells, gave it potential to create a life-affirming spot.

“Once you’re in a place it starts to tell you what is right for it,” says Scholl. “We paid attention to our location, to this particular landscape, and also to the history that played out here, from homesteaders to the Indian people who were here before us.”

What that meant in practical terms is that they built structures to withstand earthquakes and wind, to take advantage of 300 days of sunlight, and to try and blend



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in rather than stand out. Over the course of the next four or five years, Scholl and Degenhardt stayed true to those guidelines, working to create a place right for the environment while addressing their needs.

With Johnson's help, they replaced the trailer site with a pond fed by a natural spring. They built their house and shop nearby, fortified against quakes and powered largely by solar. They planted fruit trees and cottonwoods, placed rocks, thought about views and storms and native vegetation. All the while they "learned a lot about creating habitat," adds Scholl.

They are very serious about the process. The master document they created to help them think through stewardship considers everything from sunlight to soil, drainage patterns to vegetation cover, wind to precipitation. "It is a privilege to take this on," says Scholl. "We don't take that lightly."

Beneath it all is the need to nurture health and cope with disability, from wheelchair access to lifts on stairs and the placement of lawn furniture; the practical things, but also, the power of an environment to restore. "Nature is so healing," says Scholl. "It settles me, even when all I feel is pain."

"When you build these projects," says Johnson, "you never know what will come."

In the case of the Scholl and Degenhardt place, what came, among many other things, were axolotl salamanders. They surmise that either there were some axolotl eggs in the gravel brought in for the project, or that the amphibians migrated over from neighboring ponds that also support them. In any case, they appeared, and they've counted as many as 27 of them in their "Sugar Lake."

Degenhardt, in careful consultation with fisheries experts, stocked the pond with Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Three and a half years later, he was gazing out a window and noticed a large, mature trout writhing about in the beach gravel. "I called Elizabeth to come look," he remembers. "I thought it was dying. But it turns out that it was spawning." Every year since, the trout swim up a small outlet stream and return to excavate redds, or nests, in the shallows. Four weeks later, around July 1, the eggs hatch and the pond supports trout fingerlings that uneasily coexist with the axolotls, potential predators.

"For that month or six weeks, the beach is off limits for the grandkids," says Scholl.

"We don't want to mess this up," stresses Scholl. "We're looking back at the Crow people and the homesteaders, and also ahead for our grandkids and beyond."



Elizabeth Scholl relaxes beside the pond next to her home east of Livingston. Scholl says axolotl salamanders have found the pond and are working out a coexistence with the trout planted there.

We created a habitat out of what we had, and the world has responded."

For Scholl, seeing wildflowers bloom from April to September, watching the peripatetic flights of hummingbirds, seeing birds bathe in "Sugar Lake," sustains her. "I don't feel well most of the time," she admits. "This place lifts my spirits."

For Degenhardt, an unexpected pleasure is watching the insect hatches. "Cocktail hour is always near the pond, watching birds dive-bomb for bugs," he says.

"There is never a bad day," adds Scholl. She has herself set up with views from every room, whether she's doing dishes, writing at her desk, or lying in bed. Elk wander past, moose, antelope, wolves. She notes the birds building nests, the fish cruising the pond, a coyote loping across the hillside, clouds building over the mountains.

"This land feeds me." ■