

Fine gardening: Joys of the dark side

By Duo Dickinson
Special to ShoreView

Like 17th century New England farmers, the older I get, the more I realize you don't shape the landscape, the landscape shapes you. Interlocking rocks, old growth forests, and questionable soil quality tend to get in the way of grandiose visions – even on a 1 ¼-acre glacial moraine, bound by salt marsh, and always in the shade.

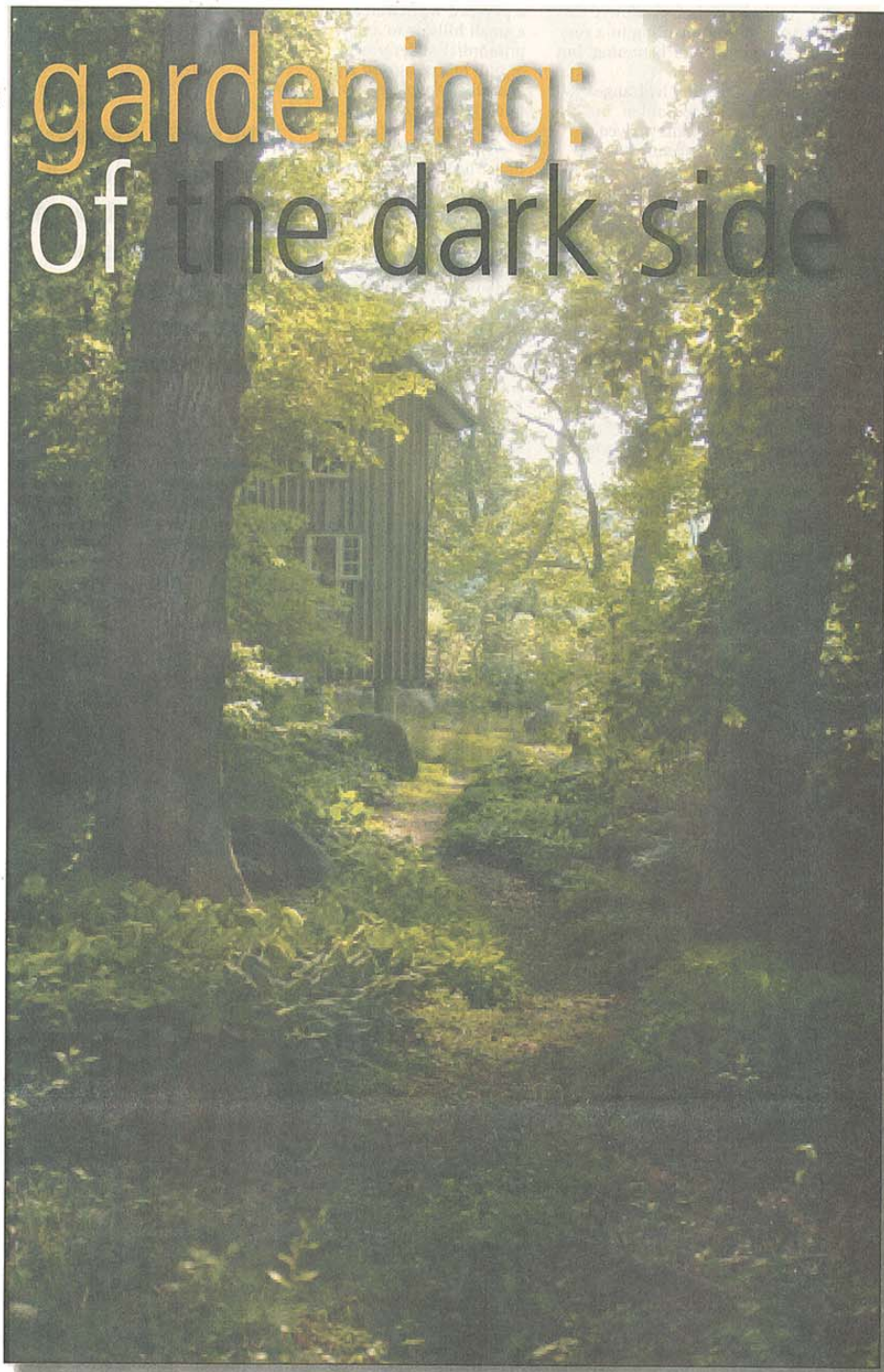
That's what I confronted in 1985, once we'd finished building our house on a piece of lowland former sheep pasture (and house garbage dump) land in Madison.

Since I had little "free time" and less once we had kids and I am not one to studiously take on the effect of a devotee in anything, I ended up indulging in "Extreme Gardening" – predawn, post sunset stolen hours of arduous imprecise effort, occasionally planting by the light cast from inside our house, insinuating a dozen plants before 6 a.m. or manic weeding before a party punctuated by crazed runs on Sunday afternoons to whatever garden supply had what I hoped to get. It wasn't pretty, but it appears, after two decades, to have been effective at keeping the landscape's character but providing enrichment and delight – I think the real gardeners call it "naturalizing."

With the help of a great garden designer, Mary Zahl, and about 10 friends (none of us had children back then) the largest and perhaps most important garden was installed amid the shade in 1986. In the intervening 20 years, we added 2/3 of an acre to our site and I've created about 15 more gardens and, as you might expect given the quirkiness of the site, each garden has its own story. In no particular order, let me describe some of them:

The Ornamental Grasses Buffer. I purchased about eight types of native grasses and planted all 100 of them at the edge of our salt marsh. Over a decade, "augmentations" were insinuated (my son's 4"-high white pine (now 12-feet tall), a dwarf bamboo, and two varieties of loose strife (don't hate me – they were legally purchased and have remained at bay in their niches for over 15 years.)

Later, the State having decided the phragmites grasses covering the marsh were evil and spartina



The "Hosta Highway" – 400 \$1 plants choke out the spread of the native Bull Briars and frame a path to the marsh.

grasses were an aggrieved victim of arboreal prejudice, phragmites were eliminated and the culvert separating us from Long Island Sound was opened up, and the higher salt content killed off approximately 90 of the 100 grasses that I originally planted.

Now replaced with a viciously invasive swamp Iris (pseudacoris) to fight against the rising tide, but

the jury is out.

The Shade Garden. A triple deep, 10-foot high stack of un-split short logs created by hurricane-felled trees lasted for about 10 years until I replaced them with deep shade loving plants (ginger, ferns, hydrangea, sweet William), all of which have grown wonderfully in the last five years.

The Clarence Thomas Garden. I

purchased two varieties of Siberian Iris – during the annual pilgrimage to White Flower Farm and back I listened with rapt attention to the live broadcast weekend hearings where Clarence Thomas did the He said/She said duet with Anita Hill – radio headphones allowed for full listening pleasure during

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A Tree Peonie (a hybrid) explodes its outside blooms despite the dim conditions.



Hostas below, Rhododendrons above and Ferns in between thrive and spread in the shade.



Despite the lack of light overall, strategic planting to available light can create blooming opportunities.

'One person's 'weed' is another person's beloved, nurtured, and treasured success.

–Duo Dickinson

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live broadcast weekend hearings where Clarence Thomas did the He said/She said duet with Anita Hill – radio headphones allowed for full listening pleasure during planting in a corner that gets just enough sun for blooming, but not for spreading.

The Mistake Garden. Creeping hydrangea were part of creating the Shade Garden, but a duplicate shipment of those plants arrived.

When I called to ask how to return them, I was told to "just keep them" I used these to fill in the spaces between the interlocking boulders at one side of our home and, over four or five years, saw that the two to three hours of sunlight each day allowed these "mistakes" to outperform their "legitimate" cousins by leaps and bounds, even blooming – a rarity in our Dark Side gardens.

The Crescent Garden. After about a decade of mowing our lawn, I noticed one area that seemed to get sun for more than two hours a day. I took a risk and over an entire summer created a 28-foot long, 10-foot-wide raised bed in the form of an amoeba-like "crescent" that followed the mowing patterns I used when keeping the grass at bay.

Here we actually planted things that like the sun and they seemed to grow.

The Dot Garden. In one specific area where our lawn was always wet I created a round raised bed utilizing Bleeding Hearts, Lenten Rose, Tiger Lilies, and Sweet William to soak up the ground water. It has worked dramatically well, once the Lenten Rose was transplanted.

The "Hosta Highway." When we were able to obtain another 2/3 acre, we had to create a pumped wastewater septic line that ran up a small hillside to a new septic system. The primordial undergrowth of bull briars, poison ivy, and other nasty aggressive undergrowth gave way to the new line.

This created natural linear beds alongside a path which my wife and I filled with 400 generic "\$1 hostas" over a period of four days. They have kept the wild undergrowth at bay and even bloom, when not eaten by deer.

The North Forty. This new septic field plateau serving our Barn of Fun was dubbed "The North Forty" and, with great protest from my family, we spent the better part of a weekend scratching at the fairly uneven (but level) ground to plant grass seed that actually took – instant meadow! Over the next few years apple and pear trees were planted. Watch out, there may be enough sun for ... vegetables!

The Remediation Garden. In creating our outbuilding, the excavator decided that the silt fence designed to keep disturbed soil out of the salt marsh should actually be put through

the salt. Not surprisingly, the wetlands officer required me to remediate this condition with a natural gardenscape of indigenous plants.

Thanks to an advising naturalist, the results over the last two or three years have been wonderful.

Choir Boy Gulch. A wee inlet off the salt marsh, now almost permanently flooded by the ever-rising tide, was planted with native swamp iris to take advantage of the now flooded condition. The site was exposed by four ex-Trinity Choirboys "working" for three hours – removing old Christmas trees, felled limbs and bull briars to reveal the gulch – a perfect place for the iris to be insinuated and spread.

E-Mailed Ferns. Itching to do something in a newly cleared space, I found a source for large, oriental ferns from Seattle. Upon planting, they spread relatively slowly, but seemed quite healthy until the onslaught of the newly liberated tidal salt water (see above) managed to kill 70 percent of them, leaving a clump nestled between two rocks that has since become quite a "nest."

Epimedium! A miraculous discovery – this Chinese plant can tolerate poor soil, no sun, and little water, thus it is perfect for my inhos-

The hostile darkness, the rising tide of salt poisoning, and the never abating indigenous groundscape make the minor miracles that become beloved events.

Learned Truths?

1. One person's "weed" is another person's beloved, nurtured, and treasured success.

2. If it requires watering and/or fertilization it will ultimately die.

3. Trimming is essential and must be done correctly – our 20-year-old rhododendrons are neither hedges nor trees.

4. If it feels good, let it grow. An entire wave of ferns has swept over areas that were carefully planted.

5. Buckwheat Hulls. A much, it's actually the only fertilizer for established beds.

6. Edge. An aggressive 10" to 12" deep

edging is done on every raised bed every other year.

7. Occasional but passionate weeding. Tight planting minimizes space for unwanted plants and I only remove them when they anger me.

8. Mow your own lawn – it forces inspection.

