

Private Garden, Public Spaces

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY DEREK THOMAS



ABOVE: Alex in his beautiful garden.

RIGHT: The lush garden.



For the past several years this column has given me the opportunity to rave about the truly beautiful gardens that we see all over Capitol Hill. The Hill Rag showcases five or six gardens each year in its annual “Best of the Hill” contest each September. The inventory on the Hill is tremendous and I see dozens of worthy candidates as I drive or walk around in my quest for the next “it” garden. Gardeners on the Hill mean business and their gardens are their business card.

The Space

This month’s garden is truly a “must see space”. It rests quietly and unassumingly in the 500 block of 13th Street, SE and takes up most of the east side of the block. It lies in the footprint of the new condo “The Escalade,” yet this garden has been transformed miles away from the predictable developer’s plant palate. This is due to the triumphant efforts of Alex Belano. Alex has taken a space that was most likely destined to become a predictable commercial condo garden designed for urban dwellers and transformed it into perhaps

the best private garden I have seen that is in a shared public space. The garden is one of unimposing elegance with surprises tucked away behind every plant.

The space is flat, very square and extremely public. Yet Alex has masterfully interwoven the best techniques of great landscape design to create a garden that is lush, inviting and feels like a garden room in a private garden, not one that is in the shadows of Pennsylvania Ave. When talking with Alex about his garden it becomes quite apparent that his thought process and design aesthetics are soft yet firm with years of practice and perseverance—the stuff great gardens are made of. He has been in the garden all his life and fondly recalls his grandmother’s garden and his time spent helping her tend it. Of his Grandmother he says, “Her gardens were great and as a result of her influence I have always been in gardens.”

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The Garden

He has been working on his condo garden for the past five years and is currently completing course work for his masters thesis in landscape design at George Washington University. His garden reads like a wondrous thesis with lush plants interwoven in a delicate urban tapestry. This garden works because it has not been over-worked. There is a flow that is unexpectedly welcome, and which softens the buildings' strong lines and the fence that contains its overflow to the sidewalk.

During the early days of the condo association meetings, owners discussed what to do about the garden. Alex says "many owners were considering lawns for their ease of maintenance. However I saw real potential in the garden, and it was easy to convince them that I could take on the task."

Take it on he has. His inspiration for the garden was the National Arboretum's Asian collection. And the garden reads like a lush hillside garden tucked into the pocket of an Asian estate. He has used texture and contrast to convey the eastern influence and steered clear of the trappings of fountains and pagodas, dry riverbeds and large stones. Crape Myrtles and uniquely pruned Cherry Laurels are the sentinels in the garden. Their height and repetition is perhaps the only rigid aspect of this garden. They are great anchors to the bounty of plantings they serve. The Giant Hostas are punctuation marks and add soft strength to the bed lines. Their flanking of the Crape Myrtles is not accidental. These three elements are the closest this garden comes to being contrived or predictable, and they demonstrate the makings of a truly great design where the designer knows the rules yet departs from them most eloquently.

Alex likes creating pockets and has placed many throughout the garden. In fact he says,



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“The little pockets are my favorites where you can see different shapes and textures in miniature.” He loves winter and spring gardens and his is at its riotous best in the first half of the year. There are over six types of Junipers that add form and function to the winter garden. The early spring is an explosive tribute to the color that well placed bulbs can provide. The months of April through June are about the lush textures and gentle flowering accents that Wild Ginger, Sedum, Hostas, Yucca, and a multitude of other great plants, when playing well together, can give to create a show-stopping garden.

Alex plans to add roses to the garden but admits, “I am not into summer gardens, so we will see how well it works.” I think he will pull it off, since what he has done is something miraculously tasteful with a very difficult space. Very well done.

Derek Thomas is principal of Thomas Landscapes. His garden designs have been featured on HGTV's Curb Appeal. His weekly garden segment can be seen on WTTG/Fox 5 in Washington. He can be reached at www.thomaslandscapes.com or 301.642.5182. ★



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Attention has been paid to a natural flow and contrast with punctuation of color

Little pockets are Alex's favorite.

The unique details like this row of Sedum are what make this garden truly special.

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