

# Side Yard Makeover...

(NOTE: Chicago was recently reclassified by USDA from zone 5 to a zone 6 habitat for plants!!)

Here is an inspiring before & after — see how a gardener completed their side yard makeover that features easy-care shrubs and perennials to lighten the workload into the future.

While it is easy to forget about side yards, those tricky strips of land between houses in our area, they can offer an interesting variety of options to enhance your home. In many cases, our side yards are either overly shady, or too narrow for much planting. For many of us, these skinny spaces are challenging to landscape. It is tempting to use them merely as passageways or an area to avoid altogether, where garbage and recycling bins are stowed and compost is piled out of sight. But they can be turned into a pleasant way to pass from the front yard to the back. Originally, this side yard was a grassy pathway that required regular maintenance of mowing, weeding and trimming along the rocky borders!



## Improving the look, reducing the work....

What a difference a few well-chosen plants and stepping stones can make!!

What was once a curved grassy path between well-mulched beds becomes inviting and attractive with the addition of a stone pathway that winds through garden beds lined with a mix of reliable shrubs, including taller shrubs in the back of the garden block the street view and noise while perennials, annuals and perhaps, some artwork dress up the design!



Laying stones in concrete can be costly and difficult. Instead, lay out the path beforehand with a hose and cardboard, to get a visual sense of how it will look. Once the existing plants are gone, start with barrier cloth to minimize weeding between the stones in the path. Reduce installation costs and work by laying gravel, stones, and fill in with a sand bed.

**Pathway plant companions :** The next step, add a few – carefully chosen, well-behaved shrubs whose mature height FITS in the space you have! Measuring BEFORE you shop is key! Finish up with smaller plant combinations can add a pop of color, without demanding large swaths of space. Here, the hot, sunny strip has heat tolerant plants of yellow zinnias and blue salvia, fragrant white calamint and good old ‘Autumn Joy’ sedum, to add more consistent color, while edging the path. In this garden, the selected plants vary in height – an important point to consider when selecting the combination of plants for any garden. Selecting the “right” shrub that will not outgrow the space, won’t shade all the neighbors, and work together to create an interesting blend of plants that bloom at different times of the season, is key to a good design. Here, they used hard-working shrubs that unify this collection of plants: panicle and smooth hydrangea, and Double Knock Out roses.

These work all summer long to keep things in good shape with minimal pruning, and full of color for most of the growing season!

## Low-maintenance plants that work in Edgebrook gardens

### Invincibelle Spirit smooth hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens*)



Hydrangeas of all kinds really work in Edgebrook gardens. They are everywhere, and of every type. Arborescens includes the very popular white Incrediball and Annabelles, very common in our local gardens!

Invincibelle Spirit is a hardy, adaptable native shrub that produces loads of snowball-shaped blooms from early summer to frost. The plant type you select will determine the color, which can range from White, whitish-lime, to various shades of pink. Invincibelle Spirit flowers form dark pink buds that open bright pink, fading to soft pink and finally to green.

Hydrangeas come in a variety of shapes, and sizes, all of which are at home in our Edgebrook Gardens. These can tolerate shade, and may become a bit leggy, but they are very dependable plants. Check out our flyer on the various types that you can plant, on the Edgebrook Community website.

### Double Knock Out® rose (*Rosa hybrid*)



My mother would fuss over her roses all summer long.... she would be thrilled to meet this fabulous, maintenance-free rose that blooms from early summer until frost, in any sunny location, with little help! Hot and dry is not a problem for these stars!!

Knock-out roses boast excellent resistance to pests as well as blackspot and downy mildew diseases, and it looks good as a low hedge or as part of a mix with other shrubs and perennials. There's no need to cut off spent blossoms because this is a self-cleaning rose.

The range of colors available in the knock-out roses is fabulous! Partner this with well behaved, small flowered perennials and you will have a great garden!! This shrub rose has blooms of fragrant magenta-red double blooms from early summer through fall. There is a wide variety of Knockout roses available at all our local garden centers, and like most roses, Knockouts do best in full sun, and grows 3 to 4 ft. tall and wide. Cold hardy in zone 5-11, it is perfect for those rare sunny locations in Edgebrook!

**Other roses to consider:** Climbing roses for a hot, sunny wall! Zephirine Drouhin is a real star in that space!! If you are thinking about other kinds of roses, stop by the **Krasberg Rose Garden** at the Chicago Botanic Gardens just a short drive up the Edens, and see what's growing there! One of the best times to drop by is in the morning, when the roses are the most fragrant in the early morning sun!

When looking for roses, consider modern David Austin® roses (soft pink 'Heritage'), that have the look and fragrance of an heirloom rose, but bloom repeatedly instead of intermittently. Heirloom roses tend to be more demanding to grow... I stick with the knockouts....

Knock Out™ rose, *Rosa* 'Radrazz', is another outstanding rose that this drought-tolerant, cold-hardy, disease-resistant, and is truly easy to grow in Chicago!! It is a 3-foot by 3-foot landscape, or shrub rose, covered with neon cherry blooms throughout its long growing season. They are really hard to beat, and we use them

extensively at the Metra Train Station in Edgebrook, where they surround our Welcome sign and dot the landscape along the tracks. Nothing says “welcome” like a knock-out rose!!



Side Notes: Perennials that can blend in to any garden in Edgebrook:

**Salvia (*Salvia splendens*)** These flower powerhouses provide consistent color from spring until frost. In Chicago, sold as annuals, but are pretty drought-tolerant. During the hottest part of the summer, they may demand some additional water to help them stay looking their best. Blooms come in red, cream, white, pink, burgundy or deep purple blooms, and as most annuals, flower from spring to fall. Best in full sun, growing 10 to 30 in. tall, 8 to 18 in. wide. Cold hardy in USDA zones 9 to 11, so each year you can add a different annual to add variety to your garden.

### **Profusion™ Yellow zinnia (*Zinnia hybrid*).....or coreopsis?**



For a front-of-the-border pop of color, annuals are really hard to beat, and this breakthrough series of bright and showy zinnias are stars!! With quarter-size flowers that cover the bushy plants all season long, this is one of the best and looks great massed in a bed, such as lining a front foundation or adding color along a pathway.

**Annual: Blooms** Yellow blooms from spring to fall Best in full sun. Grows 12 to 18 in. tall and wide.

A perennial alternative that is similar in size and flower are the fabulous coreopsis, that offer a range of yellow and red flowers, and unique names such as “Route 66” a favorite coreopsis for our area!!

### **‘Autumn Joy’ tall sedum (*Sedum hybrid*)**



This perennial star in Edgebrook, has domes of dusky pink buds that mature to rusty red flowers that provide a perfect meal for bees and butterflies late in the last summer heat!! These plants offer some winter interest to the garden, if you leave the dried stems in the garden. They are easy to break off in the spring, clearing way for new growth in spring. This is a popular plant in Edgebrook. This is a great choice for helping out native bees!

Perennial: **Blooms** Dusky pink to rust red in late summer to fall/ **Light:** Full sun **Size:** 18 to 24 in. tall and wide **Hardiness:** Zones 3 to 9 !

### **calamint (*Calamintha nepeta*)**

Mounds of gray-green foliage that's slightly fragrant when crushed are covered with small white and sometimes lavender blooms that are easy to miss by us.... However bees just love it!! Don't be surprised if they start visiting as soon as you start planting!! This plant forms smaller mounds that really need no pruning or training. Just plant, and leave them alone. (water if dry during summer)



**Type** Perennial **Blooms:** White blooms in summer to fall. **Light:** Full sun **Size:** 12 to 18 in. tall and wide  
**Hardiness;** Cold hardy in USDA zones 5 to 7

Some other sun-loving Chicago plants include a wide range of native plants that benefit the Monarchs, butterfly and bee populations in our area! These include: prairie grasses, such as little bluestem, side-oats grama, pasque flower, prairie smoke, shooting-star, blazing-star, prairie dropseed, prairie cinquefoil, sky-blue aster, prairie gentian, purple coneflower, rattlesnake master (not the most attractive on the list), silky aster, and hoary vervain. Their deep roots reach well beyond the rocky layer into the soil below.

**BEE BALM:** another sun and heat loving plant that can add a lot of color to your yard, as they come in lots of colors!!! See right -

Well if you are dealing with sun, its hard to overlook the ubiquitous daylilies.... you either love them or hate them... but they will not wilt away. The short bloom period of the flowers is the only draw back on these indestructible plants!!

Some plants in your sunny patch, can stick around to provide some winter interest to the garden include:



**Blue grasses:** Two selections of ornamental grasses that hold their blue color well into winter. Elijah Blue blue fescue (photo-left: *Festuca ovina glauca* 'Elijah Blue') is the bluest of the fescues and retains its compact form all season. Blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*) grows taller, at 2 to 3 feet, and its stiff blue foliage will remain a true blue until early spring, when it should be pruned to the ground like other ornamental grasses.

A really popular grass at all the “mall parking lots” is Karl Foerster feather reed grass, that forms clumps that stand erect with tan seed heads all fall and winter long. Not an inspired choice, but hard to complain about a plant that never needs attention.

If you garden for birds as well as yourself, then consider these very popular sun-perennials that will feed the birds through the cold winter months if left to dry and remain in the garden through winter. Purple or white coneflowers (*Echinacea purpurea*) are favorites of many birds who perch on the rounded cones and peck away at the nutritious, oil-rich seeds. Black-eyed Susans, (*Rudbeckia* spp.) are easy to grow and are also a favorite of seed-eating songbirds. When left to dry naturally in the garden, these plants will add another dimension to what we once thought was a dormant season.

### **THE SLOW APPROACH:**

These are just a few of the plants that can be planted together to create an interesting, robust garden to enhance the side of your home! When contemplating an update to your garden, we strongly recommend you take it one section at a time, addressing one area of the garden, like a side yard, a corner of the backyard....each year. This will spread out the work and expense .... and give you time to focus on each section to make it the best that it can be!!

Start with the prep – removing the old plants/hardscape and conditioning the soil (don't skip this!). That might be a year. Then spend the winter selecting the new shrubs that will be the foundation of this garden. Plant them in spring and follow-up with perennials after the shrubs get a foothold...perhaps next year... You will be glad you did!

*If your side-yard is in the shade – read our flyer “Got Shade?” for a selection of plants that do great in Edgebrook’s shady areas!*