

# Backyard Bliss

LANDSCAPING TRENDS ACROSS SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN



Did you know 2013 is the Year of Bliss? It is, at least according to the *Garden Trends Report* released last fall at the Garden Writers Association Symposium in Tucson, Ariz.

"Being in nature, either outside in a garden or park or filling your house with plants, adds immeasurable health and wellness benefits," says Susan McCoy, president of Garden Media Group.

That must be why more of us are seeking that bliss by looking in our own backyards. And to find that bliss, Southwest Michigan homeowners are sprucing up their outdoor spaces with some of the latest landscaping trends.

*Natural-looking materials are high in demand for landscaping projects, such as the stone walkway and sitting area pictured on the opposite page, designed and installed by Great Lakes Landscapes, and the firepit, designed by DeVisser Landscape Services. Below right, fieldstone boulders are still popular for retaining walls and water features such as this one designed by DeVisser Landscape Services.*

## 1. Growing our own food

Vegetable gardens and fruit trees and bushes are becoming ornamental features in landscapes. Local landscapers say a frequent request they get is to create an attractive space that has the added bonus of providing edibles. Blueberry bushes are utilized this way; they provide color year 'round, from their spring blooms and orange and red foliage in the fall to crimson stems in the winter.

Fruit and vegetable plants are being grown in lieu of such mainstays as grass and perennial shrubs. Strawberry plants are a great ground cover, and vegetable beds are being incorporated into retaining walls, says Sherry Kuzma, of Great Lakes Landscapes, in Schoolcraft. For shade, homeowners are choosing fruit trees such as peach and pear, which are more resistant to pests and require less chemical intervention than apple trees.

For those who don't need a full garden's worth of edibles, container gardens and smaller raised vegetable beds are a good bet, says Ben Yost, owner of Farm N Garden, in Kalamazoo. Plant sellers are catching on to this trend; buyers can now get single vegetable plants rather than have to buy plants in cells of six, which are "more tomatoes than most people need," says Yost.

## 2. Natural or natural-looking materials

Whether you choose to use limestone or flagstone or precast concrete that looks like those natural stones is usually a matter of budget — and maybe conscience. Limestone, flagstone and slate have to be harvested from an outcropping and then shipped, requiring more labor and cost, says Joel DeVisser, landscape designer and vice president of DeVisser Landscape Services, in Oshtemo Township. Many clients, he says, are opting instead for precast stone — concrete that is formed in stone shapes and has a natural look. The precast concrete can be used for retaining walls, steps, walkways and patios. "It is more expensive than standard concrete block but cheaper than real stone," says DeVisser.



But by far the most popular option for retaining walls is still real rock, as in the fieldstone boulder, because boulders are abundant in Southwest Michigan, making it a natural and affordable option.

### 3. Patios vs. decks

With such advancements as polymeric sand for interlocking pavers, precast concrete stone and stamped concrete, patios are surfacing as a popular option to replace wood decks. "If the space isn't going to be overhead, a lot of people are going toward patios," says Kuzma.

DeVisser agrees, saying patios can have softer lines and curves than decks.

But if your space is more suited to a deck than a patio, composite decking materials are a good option. Composite materials may be more expensive than wood but require very little maintenance. "When they first came out, they had a tendency to warp and fade," says Kuzma, "but the new materials really hold up well. All you have to do is hose them off."

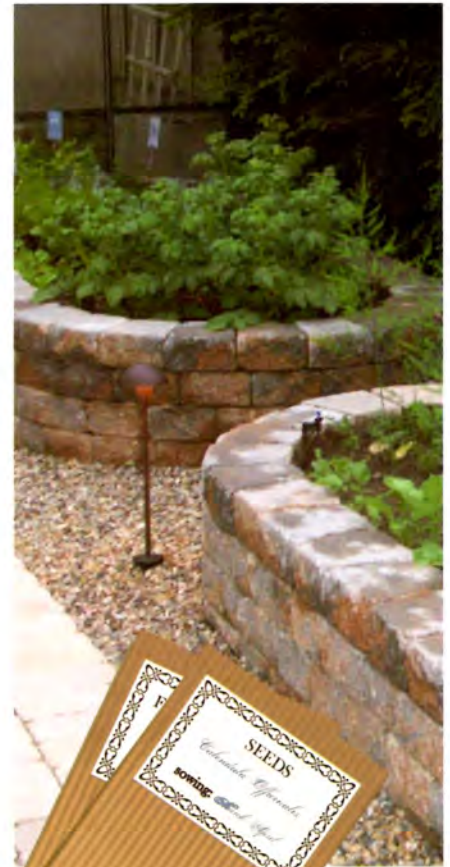
### 4. Less work, more lounging

Low-maintenance outdoor spaces are high on our lists. That's one reason more people are putting in native plants, from trees and grasses to wildflowers. Native plants are already acclimated to an area so they need less water and care and are more adaptable to the climate.

Some of us are also looking to retire our mowers. Kuzma says fussed-over, lush green lawns are being replaced with vegetable gardens, sitting areas, easy-to-care-for plants, shrubs that don't need to be trimmed as often and mulching material that requires little effort.

DeVisser, however, laments the littler-lawn trend. "It would be sad if people went to smaller lawns," he says. "Lawns are relatively low-maintenance compared to big flower beds. Plus, they help the environment by being a buffer to noise and producing oxygen."

That's why Yost recommends turning lawns into meadows by simply letting your turf grass grow long. Yost says it won't grow any taller than 6 inches and won't violate any city weed laws. "This is a trend in municipalities and parks," says Yost. "It's budget-related. They can't afford to maintain large lawn areas. It has less weeds, no need for water and will stay green in the summer."



Raised beds are an attractive landscaping option that combines beauty with the functionality of growing edibles.

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## 5. Living outdoors

When we are outdoors, we want the comforts of indoors. Outdoor living and kitchen spaces are evolving to include fireplaces, comfy seating, bars, special lighting and wiring for sound and Internet. But even in open-air great rooms such as these, there is still a need for shade.

Enter the cantilever or offset umbrella. Asheigh Kosin, of Bell Tower Outdoor Living Co., in Richland, says these umbrellas come in larger sizes and shapes than other umbrellas and can be easily relocated as the sun moves. "These umbrellas are a huge trend because they can cover the area you are dedicating to dining and lounging," she says.

Kosin recommends that buyers look for a stable umbrella, especially given the strong winds that can blow through Southwest Michigan.

"It's important to invest in one that will stand up to heavy wind," she says. "It needs a good heavy base and double wind vent."

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