

Backyard Series - Before and After Part I - The Pool By Luis Llenza

Renovating the grounds around your house is not unlike redecorating the interior, and for many people, it is a daunting challenge. My objective is to help clients define their preferences for using outdoor areas, then develop a landscape plan to bring their wishes to life, right in their own back yard.

In the next three articles, we'll share a project in which the client identified three major concerns: the pool area, the need for more privacy and the desire for a secret garden with no grass. Today, we'll tackle the pool, the main focal point of the rear yard.

The area suggested a Florida oasis. Two Coconut Palms flanked the pool on the left, and multiple Traveler Palms were growing wild behind the pool waterfall. A Sabal Palm was on the right, where the fence carefully zigzagged to accommodate its presence. White pea gravel covered the ground areas between the palms, pool deck and fence. First to go: the gravel border. Many of the stones end up in the pool, making maintenance difficult, and the medium attracts neighborhood cats.

The Coconut Palms were not thriving. After two applications of fertilizer, there was no improvement, and one palm died. We cut both trees down to ground level, but we were unable to use a stump grinder, due to the small space. To cover the stumps, we mixed humus and potting soil with existing gravel. This created an elevated new planting site that would have excellent drainage.

We kept the palm tree look, but changed the scale, by planting two *Carpenteria acuminata* Palms, known for their slender trunks. Underneath the palms, towards the waterfall, we planted several varieties of Bromeliads and Cordylines to add color.



Behind the waterfall, we removed three of the Traveler Palm pups and shaped the remaining trunks and leaves to show off their architectural beauty. Because the Sabal Palm needed to be saved, we maximized its appearance by cleaning out dead fronds and pulling excess Spanish moss from the tree.

To the right of the waterfall, we planted textured-leaf plants, *Philodendron 'Burle Marxi'*. The Bromeliads and the *Philodendron* fill in to make a lush under story, while providing privacy from the neighboring property. We finished the perimeter of the pool by planting Dwarf Cavendish Bananas. They balance the

pool composition and make a perfect transition into the *Carpenteria acuminata* Palms which are repeated in the side garden.

The last step was to paint the pool deck a light beige tone that melds beautifully into the terra cotta coping around the pool. The new additions blend with existing structures to maintain, yet enhance the client's private oasis.



Backyard Series - Before and After
Part II - Privacy and Shade
By: Luis Llenza

In the project we introduced in part one of this series, the client identified privacy as a major objective in the renovation of his landscape. As you can see in the before photograph, an existing fence failed to screen the yard from the neighboring property, was in questionable condition and aesthetically unattractive. The lack of trees contributes to the problem and leaves the patio and turf areas at the mercy of the sun.



Although the client wanted to replace the fence, close examination revealed it to be in sound condition with no decay. We erased the gray, weathered look by pressure washing and paint. The application of a green paint wash sealed the finish and created a complementary backdrop for the garden we were to install.

Next, we suggested to the client that he remove the existing water-guzzling grass. This is a two-week process, and will work wherever you wish to eradicate grass. First, we applied contact weed killer to asphyxiate all the grass. The following week we applied topsoil for a new garden base. Use this method wherever you wish to reconfigure grassy areas. For example, some people may want to redefine planting areas, while others wish to keep some turf for pets to use.

To create privacy quickly, we took advantage of fast-growing clumping bamboo plants. We elevated the left side of the back yard perimeter to provide requisite drainage for Mexican Weeping Bamboo (*Otatea acuminata*). On the far right perimeter, we planted Golden Hawaiian Bamboo (*Bambusa vulgaris* "Vittata"). We filled in the space with variegated Shell Gingers (*Alpinia zerumbet* 'variegata') and Travelers Palms (*Ravenala madagascariensis*) to create a secondary canopy. Bromeliads and various colored ground orchids (*Spathoglottis*) accent the foreground.



The after photo illustrates the tropical garden that now graces this area of the yard. The taller plants become a privacy and noise screen while creating welcome shade to yard and patio areas. Instead of grass, we used mulch, Mondo grass and irregular-sized stepping stones for ground cover. In keeping with the water conserving principles of xeriscaping, we reconfigured the irrigation system, using fewer heads, therefore, decreasing water use.

This xeriscape style will be integrated with a water feature in the client's private garden, the subject of next month's article

Backyard Series – Before and After Part III – The Private Garden By: Luis Llenza

A private garden within a backyard landscape adds an exciting feature to a client's custom design, as we conclude our three-part series. To create a lush, intimate retreat, we needed to eliminate as much turf as possible and select a variety of low maintenance, yet dramatic, plants.



While primarily for the owners' private relaxation, this 18-by-22-foot area of the yard is open to the house and deck, and becomes a focal point when entertaining guests. The before photograph shows how little privacy was afforded by the existing chain-link fence. The client agreed with our recommendation to install a wooden privacy fence that would match existing fencing elsewhere in the yard.

To anchor the new landscape, we transplanted three Queen Palms which had outgrown their spot in the front yard. Arranged in a triangle, these trees create the top of the multi-layered canopy in the private garden. After removing the turf, we elevated an area to the right of the palms to accommodate Mexican Weeping Bamboo (*Otatea acuminata*). The resulting slope allows water to drain off to the left, toward the triangle base of the palms. This xeriscape design promotes high humidity in the covered area and allows wild ferns to grow as ground cover.

Next to the palms, we planted various types of Elephant Ears, ranging in height from three feet to seven feet, with leaves from 15 inches to two feet long. To provide texture and contrast, we used *Alocasia* 'Purple Prince', with oversized purplish black stems leading to green leaves, *Alocasia* 'Lutea' with yellowish green leaves, *Colocasia* 'Black Magic' with purplish black leaves and *Colocasia* 'Nancy's Revenge', whose solid green leaves turn butter cream yellow along the center. Peering out from the midst of this dramatic group is a Voodoo Lilly, a tall, primeval, symmetrical-stalked plant that grows to six feet at maturity.



A *Crinum* Lilly highlights the descending side of the canopy and is flanked by various plants, including cordylines, one single-trunked *Syagrus schizophylla* Palm, sporting a showy full crown, and a low-growing *Chambeyronia macrocarpa* Palm, known for its wide reddish canopy. This grouping forms the backdrop for a patch of varied bromeliads, while several subspecies of *Neoregelia* 'fireball' surround a custom water feature and a large *Aechmea* anchors the right side. Finally, we created walkways with stepping stones laid in a unique pattern. A Passion vine, trailing along the fence, Mondo grass and mulch help to reinforce the illusion of a gently sloped hillside garden.