

Architect divides to conquer gardens at train station and her home in Edgewood

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By Kevin Kirkland / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Suzan Lami designs buildings for a living, but she lives to garden.

"I'm one of those crazy people. I love to weed," said Ms. Lami, a partner with her husband, Bob Grubb, in Lami Grubb Architects, which has its office on East Swissvale Avenue in Edgewood.

Obviously, she also loves to plant, too. Three years ago, when her firm expanded into a historic train station across the street, Ms. Lami put in garden beds filled with perennials and low-maintenance shrubs and partnered with Nine Mile Run Watershed to create a rain garden.

Next Sunday, the train station garden and Ms. Lami's home garden nearby will both be featured on the Pittsburgh Botanic Garden's Town & Country Garden tour. From 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., 12 gardens in Edgewood and Oakmont will be open for the region's biggest garden tour, a fundraiser for the botanic garden under construction on 452 acres in Collier and North Fayette.

Although the two Lami gardens have different purposes, they share many of the same plants, including sundrops, coreopsis, pink coneflowers, yellow and purple daylilies, patio lilies, ferns, liatris, phlox, Virginia sweetspire, purple smokebush and oakleaf hydrangea.

"I love that you can dig up plants to share," she said. "A lot of plants I got as divisions from neighbors and friends. I'm a cheap gardener."

And a busy one. In addition to tending two sizable gardens, Ms. Lami estimates she divided more than 120 plants this spring. Many were for her daughter's new garden in Avalon.

The lush beds around the 1903 train station designed by Frank Furness for the Pennsylvania Railroad appear to be much older than 3 years. One section is not quite so thick, the victim of a late-night driver who failed to navigate a bend in the road last summer. On a clear day, the rain garden next to it is identifiable only by a sign installed by Nine Mile Run. Ms. Lami has seen it

16th annual Pittsburgh Botanic Garden Town & Country Garden Tour

When: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. June 23.

Tickets: Self-guided tours: \$40 members, \$50 nonmembers, available at local shops or on tour day at Oakmont clock tower, Allegheny River Boulevard & Maryland Avenue; and Edgewood Train Station.

Bus tour: Includes lunch at Longue Vue Country Club, \$115 members, \$130 nonmembers. Pre-register at 412-444-4464.

Information:
www.pittsburghbotanicgarden.org

filled only once, during a rainstorm last summer that flooded the adjacent intersection. Rainwater rarely is more than 4 inches deep in the depression and seeps into the ground shortly after the rain stops, just as it's designed to do.

Around the back of the station is a small vegetable garden where Ms. Lami plants -- and sometimes eats with her lunch -- tomatoes, zucchini, Swiss chard, eggplant, bok choy, artichokes, strawberries, sage, oregano, rosemary and her favorite, "Gina beans" brought from Italy by her grandmother, Gina Lami.

"Most Italian beans are really tough, but these are so tender. Steam them for a minute and they're like *buttuhh*," she said, smiling.

Nearby is another unusual find: Japanese laurel or gold dust plant, whose green leaves are splashed with bright yellow variegation. At the train station, the shrub has more gold because it gets more sun. The one at Ms. Lami's house a block and a half away is in deeper shade and has less "dust." Although it's not reliably hardy here, it seems very happy in both spots, basking in heat reflected from buildings.

Ms. Lami and her husband have lived in Edgewood for 27 years. When they moved to this house 14 years ago, the front lawn was mostly grass. Now it is divided into two areas by small shrubs and trees, including both native and Chinese fringetrees. Besides framing their 1923 brick house, the middle bed offers privacy to anyone sitting on the front porch. This garden -- requiring more care than the train station garden -- is filled with blue and white liatris, coral bells, pulmonaria, white Asian lilies, hostas and many Japanese painted ferns, all of which were divided from a single plant.

Beds stretch along the driveway and curve around the back to shelter a patio with a seating wall designed with help from landscape architect Joel Le Gall. Ms. Lami said having an architect as a client was probably a test of Mr. Le Gall's patience.

"I'm all bossy. I said, 'Here's what I want to do.'"

"Then Joel said, 'How about this?' and I'm like 'I never thought of that!' "

Stars of this shady garden include climbing hydrangea, phlox, dianthus, artemisia and pink larkspur that grew from a few volunteer seedlings. A variegated hydrangea has the added bonus of many flowers this year.

Ms. Lami said the garden's small size means she has little room for new plants.

"You move things around a lot, like rearranging furniture," she said.

When this architect turns exterior designer, she admitted she sometimes goes overboard.

"I'll see an open space in the spring and try to cram some things in. Then they fill out and I'll think, 'Why did I do that?' "

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