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Parking strips designed for beauty and drought tolerance by Portland gardeners

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Kym Pokorny, The Oregonian
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Even more than the front door, parking strips say "welcome" -- but not necessarily in a good way. Usually left as a dandelion-spotted lawn attractive only to neighborhood dogs, these belts of bleakness deserve more attention. Really, though, who wants to spend time maintaining one more garden bed, especially a hard-to-water, difficult-to-tend hell strip?

Actually, the number is increasing. Jan O'Dell, marketing and communications director for the **Regional Water Providers Consortium**, can attest to that. She's gathered a series of exemplary parking strips and shares three of those with us. All of them focus on water efficiency, with measures such as drip-irrigation systems, thick mulch and, most of all, drought-tolerant plants.

Francoise Renaud, Lisa Mullen and Cheryl Cameron Rectanus and Fred Rectanus wanted street-side welcome mats that delighted both visitors and passers-by. But they didn't want to spend a lot of upkeep time and the water that's becoming so precious. With some research, planning and initial work, they created examples that we hope will inspire you.

FRANCOISE RENAUD, Northeast Portland

Q: How long have you been in your current home?

A: We moved here in July of 2005.

Q: What's your gardening experience?

A: Until I was 9 years old, I lived in the country near Skyline and Rock Creek. My mother and the other

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Jan O'Dell

Parking strips can reflect your personality, like the one on the street in front of Francoise Renaud's home.

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women in our community grew most of our food in a large garden outside our house. We canned, kept bees, pigs, rabbits, and smoked meat as well. Being outside and eating things we grew or found wild was simply a daily part of life.

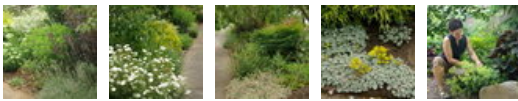


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The Oregonian

Francoise Renauld

strips gallery (16 photos)



In my adult life, gardening really became a passion when my husband and I bought our first home in North Portland 18 years ago. It had beautiful soil, and mature trees and bushes, but lots of lawn. I spent our 13 years there removing all but a tiny bit of grass on the 50-by-100-foot lot. I experimented with natural paths, vegetable gardening, perennial gardens and growing fruiting trees and bushes. That garden was a slow, organic process and changed a lot over the years as time and money allowed.

Q: What did your parking strip look like before it took on the current incarnation?

A: It was an 8-by-80-foot solid strip of grass with only two mature trees.

Q: What inspired your changes?

A: About eight years ago, I went on a garden tour with my mother-in-law and saw a beautiful parking strip

there. It was thickly planted with no visible dirt, and the complexity of the environment that had been created was beautiful and added so much to the neighborhood and the house.

Q: Did you set out specifically to create a low-water bed?

A: I did. Hell strips are hot and not fun places for many plants to live. I wanted hardy, low-water plants that could thrive there. I could live more sustainably by creating a garden that would add to the environment rather than simply suck resources. And I could labor less in the care of the plants.

Q: Did you focus on drought-tolerant plants and/or things like soaker hoses and deep mulch?

A: I do all of the above and try to get dwarf or small varieties of trees and shrubs, so that I can have more in less space. I had the sod removed initially with a sod cutter and tilled lightly. I then put down about 8 inches of compost and planted into that (I had most of that done professionally). My mom and I did the first plants in the fall and kept planting through the winter that year to get them all in. After initial plants went in, we put another 2 to 3 inches of compost down and weeded like mad the first season. It has been very easy to maintain since then with another compost spread in year 3.

My father gave us a house-warming present by personally installing a drip system in the garden in the first spring. The drip system needs adjustment and maintenance every spring and as plants are moved or added; I have learned to do that. It has been gratifying as things grow to be able to take them off the watering system altogether and to see the ecosystem there begin to work to sustain the plants. Watering things deeply when I do water and making sure I plant at the right time of year so they can get established helps a lot. That way I've been able to have a wider array of plants than just those listed as "drought tolerant."

Q: Anything you would have done differently?

A: The lovely thing about gardening is that when you want to do something differently you can! I have changed a lot out there as time and the seasons have affected the space. I am currently in the process of removing a supposedly semi-dwarf Italian plum, at least that was what the garden tag said. I'm not sure what I will put in its place, perhaps the blueberries will just get more room?

Q: What's your favorite part of your parking strip?

A: The new tangle this year of shrub roses growing up against the crabapple tree with blueberries nearby. I love all the edible things there. We use rosemary in the kitchen, pick blueberries and figs. It's lovely in the evening to watch the birds as they come and go.

Q: Any tips for someone wanting to get creative with a parking strip?

A: I like to pick one area at a time to work in and get that zone just right before I move on. As I have gained experience, the areas I can manage to work with are larger. Group things together and think about height, smell, texture. Plant things you love. I get lots of plant ideas from my family, friends, and attending plant tours, classes or shows, and wandering nurseries.



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Q: Do you get comments from neighbors/passers-by? If so, what do they say?

A: People stop all the time and ask about plants, comment on how much the garden has added to the street, talk about enjoying the changes that happen. Lots of "I love coming by here," "This is such a special place," "Thank you" and "I come out of my way to walk by your garden." It is a fun place to be as people bring their dogs and kids by and stop to chat.

Q: How long did it take you to create this look?

A: It was pretty set in the first two years. Since then it has been growth and refinement. I lost about nine rosemary plants in the snow two years ago and had to replant about 10 feet of the 80-foot strip.

10 of Francoise's favorite plants

Baptisia (false indigo)

Blueberry

Dwarf cherry

Flannel bush (*Fremontodendron*)

Flowering crabapple

Goji berry

Heather

Origanum 'Kent Beauty' (ornamental oregano)

Penstemon

Trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*)

LISA MULLEN, Northeast Portland

Q: How long have you been in your current home?

A: Four years

Q: What's your gardening experience?

A: My first garden was a rental in Eugene in 1989. It was heavily influenced by the English style -- roses, delphiniums and poppies. When I finally moved up to Portland, I transplanted my garden plant by plant, brick by brick, to yet another rental. Ten years after that very first garden, I finally bought a house and started experimenting with drought-tolerant and zonal-denial plants. I also installed patios, paths and a pond. When I moved from there, I took clippings and seedlings from some of my favorite plants and transported them to my current place and started all over. Has it really been over 20 years?!

Q: What did your parking strip look like before?

A: Absolutely flat with dead grass and not-so-dead weeds. I didn't even own a lawnmower, so I had to start digging it up pretty quickly.

Q: What inspired your changes?

A: There's lots of river rock in the soil in this neighborhood. I decided to embrace that and create dry riverbeds that looked like they came down naturally from the slope above. I mounded some of the extra soil from the front garden around the edges of the riverbeds to make them appear more natural.

Q: Did you set out specifically to create a low-water bed?

A: Yes. I like the look of many of the drought-tolerant plants, and they fit into the vision of simplicity that I wanted to create in the front of the house. I wanted it to appear slightly wild but contained. I also didn't want to have to stand out there watering throughout the summer.

Q: Did you focus on drought-tolerant plants and/or things like soaker hoses and deep mulch?

A: Definitely focused on the plants, but I do place a deep mulch around the plants once a year.

Q: Anything you would have done differently?

A: No.



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Q: What's your favorite part of your parking strip?

A: The eucalyptus. It's evergreen and fits in nicely with everything else. I've let it become multi-stemmed, like a large shrub.

Q: Any tips for someone wanting to get creative with a parking strip?

A: Ask what you want it to look like ultimately. More of a focus on flowers or shrubs? Maybe a simpler look with just a few plants? Is it important for it to look good throughout the year? Go to Cistus or Joy Creek nurseries and look at their display beds. Walk around neighborhoods and see what other people are doing. There's lots of creativity out there.

Q: Do you get comments from neighbors/passers-by? If so, what do they say?

A: Yes, whenever I'm out there. Usually things like "Thank you for giving me enjoyment every time I walk/drive by."

Q: How long did it take you to create this look?

A: One summer.

10 of Lisa's favorite plants

Albizia julibrissin 'Summer Chocolate' (purple mimosa tree)

Arctostaphylos rudis (shagbark manzanita)

Eucalyptus parvula

Euphorbia characias ssp. *wulfenii*

Hebe pimeleoides 'Quicksilver'

Hesperaloe parviflora (red yucca)

Lavandula stoechas 'Otto Quast'

Stipa tenuissima (Mexican feather grass)Pineapple guava (*Feijoa sellowiana*)

Yucca linearifolia

CHERYL CAMERON RECTANUS AND FRED RECTANUS, Northeast Portland

Q: How long have you been in your current home?

A: 17 years.

Q: What's your gardening experience?

A: I began gardening about 25 years ago, although my early attempts were limited to planting common annuals all in a row, alternating by type. I liked gardening but sure wasn't satisfied by those early attempts. When my husband, Fred, and I moved into our home, the backyard was pretty much a blank canvas. I spent a year or so planning, poring over catalogs, going to nurseries, reading books/articles and talking to other gardeners, watching where the yard got light at different parts of the day. We put a lot of energy into transforming the space, and I was hooked. The front garden took a bit longer to tackle, but the experience we'd gained from the back garden project was really helpful.

Q: What did your parking strip look like before?

A: I suppose one might say that it was technically a "lawn." In reality, it was a weed patch with areas of moss. The soil was quite sandy, and our neighbors told us that a previous owner used to change their car's oil on the grass, leaving a mess behind. There were no plants, no shrubs, no trees. Just a large expanse of weedy grass.

Q: What inspired your changes?

A: The parking strip was part of a larger plan to completely renovate the front yard. "Pacific Northwest with Asian elements" best describes what we wanted. Fred and I worked first on the hardscape with the inspiration of our contractor (who was in landscape design prior to becoming a contractor), and then planted trees to provide shade and privacy. Next came the watering system, and we were grateful for the work that Andrew Shuler of Earth Sculpt did. Finally, we worked closely with landscape designer Carolyn Perrin. We wanted to play a bit with the parking strip, and have plants that attract hummingbirds figure prominently. We've had hummingbirds year-round now for the past three years, and it's great to see them feeding in the summer and fall.

Q: Did you set out specifically to create a low-water bed?

A: Yes. We wanted to conserve resources in the entire front garden. We also knew that the parking strip gets a great deal of sun and wind, so tough, drought-tolerant plants were a must. We didn't want the parking strip to be high-maintenance, so any plants that were fussy or temperamental were out.

Q: Did you focus on drought-tolerant plants and/or things like soaker hoses and deep mulch?

A: When we were ready to plant, we replaced some of the sandy soil and amended it with copious amounts of compost. Once the plants were in the ground, we mulched them heavily to aid moisture retention and to keep the weeds down. We add compost each year, and use no chemicals in the yard.

Q: Anything you would have done differently?

A: Planted the trees earlier so they'd be bigger by now. No, seriously, we included several phormiums in the plan, but each winter they died despite our efforts to protect them. We like the vertical element that they provide and the striking geometry of the plant, so we decided to put two pots in the strip, and planted new phormium in the pots. Andrew added drip irrigation for the pots. In winter, we move them to the garage when the temperatures drop below freezing, and are happy not to have to replace them each year.

Q: What's your favorite part of your parking strip?

A: I don't know if we have a favorite part. I love the contrasting colors and textures, especially the echinacea, calendula and Russian sage. I also love the Japanese blood grass and other grasses. We appreciate the repetition of some of the plants. And best of all, while the garden requires some weeding, feeding and mulching, the time it takes to accomplish these tasks is far less than it took trying to coax a weedy lawn to lushness.

Q: Any tips for someone wanting to get creative with a parking strip?

A: Gather inspiration from many places. Don't be afraid to work with a professional to help ensure that your plan is cohesive.

Q: Do you get comments from neighbors/passers-by? If so, what do they say?

A: Most people simply comment on how much they like the garden and how pretty it is. We notice passers-by pausing and pointing to various things in the garden. It's fun to see children stop to check out the flowers. Last week, Fred noticed a mom taking photos of her two toddlers enjoying the flowers. It's great to see the garden bring joy to others.

Q: How long did it take you to create this look?

A: The whole process from design to razing the yard, placing retaining boulders, installing the water system and planting took a couple of years. I'm sure our neighbors were relieved when we were finally done!

10 of Cheryl and Fred's favorite plants:

Agastache rupestris and 'Firebird' (hyssop)

Calendula 'Antares Flashback' (pot marigold)

Cornus sericea 'Kelsey' (dwarf redbud dogwood)

Echinacea 'Sundown' and 'Harvest Moon'

Festuca 'Elijah Blue' (blue fescue grass)

Imperata cylindrica 'Red Baron' syn. 'Rubra' (Japanese blood grass)

Lantana

Osteospermum 'Nuanza Copper Purple' (African daisy)

Perovskia atriplicifolia (Russian sage)

Phormium tenax 'Atropurpureum' (New Zealand flax)

RESOURCES

The Regional Water Providers Consortium is a volunteer group of 24 water providers and Metro. The organization collaborates on water-supply issues and water-conservation education for the public.

It provides scads of information online, including:

A full-color booklet "Water-Efficient Plants for the Willamette Valley," as well as informational

articles and brochures. Download on the consortium's website.

A weekly update to tell you the amount of water in inches needed for your garden that week.

Videos, recommended books and other websites for additional information.

A free water gauge (to measure the amount of water you use in one week), available through September by calling 503-823-7528 or sending an e-mail to RWPCinfo@water.ci.portland.or.us.

Garden photos wanted: The Regional Water Providers Consortium is interested in showcasing examples of how local gardeners incorporate water-wise gardening practices into their home gardens. E-mail a digital photo of your home garden, along with a short description of how you use water efficiently in your landscape, to RWPCinfo@portlandoregon.gov.

-- [Kym Pokorny](#)

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