

Rain catcher: A designer brings beauty to bioswales

November 13, 2008

When she was 15, Kristien Forness spent a good chunk of the summer grounded. Instead of sulking, she planted a rose garden. "Of course, I did everything wrong," says the now-31-year-old garden designer. "I planted on the north side and ended up with bare roses." Still, it was enough to inspire her future. Two years later, Forness was off to Clemson University in South Carolina to study horticulture.



Kristien Forness uses organic methods in her garden and encourages her clients to do likewise. Some of these practices include planting drought-tolerant plants, replacing grass with ecolawn, choosing permeable materials for paths and patios, and including bioswales to collect and absorb rainwater.

Marv Bondarowicz/The Oregonian

Her college years were interspersed with internships and research jobs at The Arboretum at Flagstaff (Arizona) and the South Carolina Botanical Garden. Then, in one of those defining moments, she moved to Portland in 2001 with her husband, Matt Forness. "I wasn't sure what in the world I was going to do," she says. One option was a graduate science program at Portland State University. Another was a job at Portland Nursery. "I got an acceptance letter and job offer within a week," she says. "I decided to go with plants."



Forness' business, Fusion Landscape Design, expands through word of mouth. Clients are drawn to her approach of creating separate areas for separate uses, as well as incorporating rain gardens, which have become one of her design signatures.

Marv Bondarowicz/The Oregonian

A job morphed into a career as Forness became serious about creating gardens and started Fusion Landscape Design. From the outset she had a vision. "I really like to divide space up, make separate rooms," Forness says. That can mean areas for kids, pets, meditation. "I want to make it an amazing space for people to live in, not just something to look at," she says. In her own backyard, space is allocated to an ornamental vegetable garden; a chubby, L-shaped patio of bluestone pavers, some randomly removed in a creative leap of faith; and one of Forness' signatures, an innovative rain garden.

She designs bioswales as often as her clients say "Yes," because she believes strongly in reducing runoff,

which pollutes rivers and kills fish. A relatively new concept, rain gardens absorb water from downspouts and have largely been utilitarian rather than ornamental.



As is her custom, Forness places her rain garden in a prominent place; in this case, next to her patio.

Marv Bondarowicz/The Oregonian

For Forness, though, they are an opportunity for a significant visual element in a garden. "I like to make it a water feature; put it right up front instead of the back, where it can be ignored and get messy," she says. The front-and-center location for her own rain garden proves the point. Anchoring the finish of an entrance path, the bioswale is a picture of balance and texture. On one side, plants such as willow (*Salix purpurea* 'Nana'), river birch (*Betula nigra*) and red-twig dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*) mimic a sunny riverbank. On the other, evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*), bugbane (*Actaea simplex* (syn. *Cimicifuga*) 'Black Negligee') and Japanese blood grass (*Imperata cylindrica* 'Rubra') duplicate a shady, moist stream bank. Big leaves from hosta, ornamental rhubarb (*Rheum palmatum*) and mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*) deliver texture and balance; recurring clumps of stiffly upright rush (*Juncus polyanthemos*) measure a tempo for the mini-ecosystem.



In a stroke of creative genius, Forness had a friend carve the trunk of a diseased cherry tree that had to come down. Five wood blocks now decorate the beds.

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Even more telling of Forness' philosophy of ornamental bioswales is one she designed for two neighbors who wanted a shared space that was more than a driveway. The resulting rain garden sits squarely between the two houses and does double duty by absorbing water from downspouts on both houses.



The beautiful non-native passion vine (*Passiflora caerulea*) scrambles up a metal-grid fence in Forness' landscape, where she embraces native plants, but not exclusively. She focuses on using appropriate plants in mini-ecosystems.

Marv Bondarowicz/The Oregonian

Rain gardens are just one way Forness supports sustainable landscapes. She looks at a garden as a series of individual habitats and chooses plants appropriate to each site. She nudges clients to remove lawn or replace it with ecolawns. She includes edible gardens in her designs and uses permeable materials for paths and patios.

Far from her first rose garden -- both in time and space -- Forness holds onto that memory and proves that sometimes failure leads to success.

--*Kym Pokorny*