



## Gathering moss gives couple a fresh take on front lawn

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Elaine and Larry Stept's Point Breeze neighbors were stumped. For six years the couple had tried and mostly failed to grow grass in the shade of a large oak tree. Now the grass was gone, and they were slathering on some kind of milky pea soup mixed with ... moss chunks?

"For the first couple years, the neighbors thought we were insane," Mrs. Stept said. "They kept stopping by and asking, 'What are you doing?'"

Six years later, the neighbors aren't wondering anymore. They're admiring the Stepts' fuzzy, no-mow moss lawn surrounded by similarly low-maintenance shade plants. For their courage, and a backyard filled with more shade lovers, a pond, a waterfall and some whimsical yard art, the couple has won first place in the medium-size, early summer category of the Great Gardens Contest sponsored by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and Pittsburgh Botanic Garden. This is the 12th year of the competition but the first time a moss garden has been entered.

“The idea was to work with nature rather than fight it,” said Phyllis Gricus, a landscape designer and friend. “Moss is so tactile. It’s soft on the toes. It’s much more interesting than a lawn.”

The Stepts were both skeptical and intrigued when Ms. Gricus suggested it. Isn’t there something sacrilegious about not having at least a little grass in front of the house?

“They were very brave,” Ms. Gricus said. “Most people think of moss as a weed. But it was already happy there. The oak leaves help acidify the soil.”

The first step was to remove the thin layer of grass and weeds. The next was to test the pH of the soil. Moss performs best in an acidic environment, around 5.5 pH, she said. Then Ms. Gricus introduced the Stepts to Moss Acres ([www.mossacres.com](http://www.mossacres.com)), a nursery in Honesdale, Pa., that specializes in moss and ferns. They purchased moss fragments mixed in a gel and scraps that could be blended with buttermilk in a “moss milkshake.”

The nursery suggests adding bits of local moss to the slurry. Friends and co-workers from as far away as Fox Chapel and Churchill responded.

“If you find a container of moss on your doorstep, you’ll know it’s me,” said one friend.

Moss growing is a slow process, the Stepts discovered. With daily watering, the slurry takes three to six months to create a thin green layer of fuzz. It begins to thicken and form a solid green carpet in 12 to 18 months. That made for a long wait and a lot of good-natured razzing from gawkers on their dead-end street. Luckily, the couple was busy on the backyard, too.

Another large oak and some tall hemlocks meant sun was not a frequent visitor there either. In 2006, the Stepts removed a small in-ground pool and constructed a kitchen addition and solarium that doubles as a family room. The backyard was a mess.

“It was basically a mud pit,” Mrs. Stept said.

Ms. Gricus stepped in again, designing a simple shade garden anchored by a winding path and a water feature. She planted small trees, shrubs and perennials that would thrive there and gave her friend a list of others.

“We had to embrace the whole shade thing,” Mrs. Stept said. “You don’t get beautiful flowers. You have to focus on foliage, its color and shape.”

In the years that followed, as the moss lawn matured, she scoured local nurseries and garden centers, looking for shade lovers for both front and back. She would sometimes call her friend excitedly and say: “Guess what I found? How many should I get?”

Shrubs include witch hazel, Korean spice viburnum, oakleaf and bigleaf hydrangea, kerria, ilex, ‘Rainbow’ leucothe and hinoki cypress. Perennials include blue star creeper, grape hyacinth, scilla, creeping jenny, phlox, woodruff, creeping mazus, liriope, glory-of-the-snow, anemone, coral bells, and dwarf and water irises.

Fuschia and other tropicals have also found a home among the many ferns and alongside a small pond and waterfall. Most of the tropicals spend winters beside the solarium’s picture window, which offers a prime view of the shade garden in summertime. Here and there on the winding path are whimsical ornaments and statues. Laughing Lucy, a bobbing sculpture made from a shovel, auto suspension spring and other metal parts, was purchased at the Three Rivers Arts Festival in the 1980s.

To get an overall look at her backyard, Mrs. Stept heads up to the roof of the addition. She’s proud of what she and Ms. Gricus ([www.landscapedesignstudios.com](http://www.landscapedesignstudios.com)) have accomplished and very willing to provide a testimonial on the merits of shade gardening and a mossy lawn. So far, she and her husband have the only one.

“Larry and Elaine were the bravest,” Ms. Gricus said. “I haven’t been able to talk anyone else into it.”

Maybe you have to see it to believe it. A couple of the Steps’ skeptical neighbors seem to be warming up to the idea.

“Now they say, ‘You know, we’re considering doing a moss garden,’” she said, laughing.

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