



The prosaic small front yard when I moved in—lawn and “parsley around the turkey” foundation plants.



Springer Ogden

This year the *Undaunted Plants* column will feature and discuss aspects of Lauren’s half-acre garden in Fort Collins, Colorado, which she is leaving after 14 years. The first, below, is about her small but diverse front garden.

## A Small Front Garden with Year-Round Beauty

Lauren Springer Ogden | Text and Photographs

plants; I much prefer being in the audience or designing and working in the backyard.

My front yard is a flat roughly 35 by 50-foot rectangle on the east side of the house. This eastern aspect is actually a blessing in the strong sunlight and dry conditions of our region, with morning sun and then a respite for much of the afternoon. Here the coldest, strongest winds usually come out of

the northwest so the east side is also quite wind-sheltered and tends to dry out less than western or southern exposures. More water and shelter means more trees and shrubs are possible.

### TREES FIRST

Upon moving in, my first goal for the front yard was to get rid of the existing lawn and scruffy foundation plantings, and plant deciduous trees. I needed some summer shade for the house, but mainly I wanted to retreat into the magical wonderland of a garden and see as little of the street and my neighbors as possible. Of course these young trees did very little for the garden culturally or aesthetically the first five years or so while they were either too small to count or gawky teenagers. My design suffered from both an identity crisis and lack of love during that time as many of the sun-loving plants I plant-



Daffodils, Lenten roses (*Helleborus x hybridus*), blue grape hyacinths (*Muscari* sp.), gold-tipped juniper (“Old Gold”), and acid yellow cushion spurge (*Euphorbia polychroma*) burst forth in springtime at the base of the largest tree in the garden, a 30-foot Catalpa Lauren planted from a 5-gallon pot.



Another view on the shadier side of the Catalpa where in springtime daffodils and cushion spurge bloom amid a foliage carpet of “chartreusosity”.

ed were merely placeholders for the denizens I ultimately planned for the space. Such is the case of any garden where one plants trees.

Within five years’ time from tree planting much of the front garden had become lightly shaded during the growing season and was blocking neighborhood views. When in full growth it would sometimes even hide me when I worked in it; passersby would stop and comment to each other, sometimes unaware that I was within earshot. Most comments were positive but not all, and in the case of the latter I amused myself by popping my head up with a cheerful “hello” upon hearing them.

### PLANTS AS STRUCTURE

Instead of building strong-lined hardscape, I decided to rely on plants with long-lasting form, color, and texture to anchor and unify the space, draw the eye and lead down the casual stepping-stone flagstone path to and from the front door and across the garden. I think most small front gardens do best to stay away from extra hardscape because

the house already functions as such a dominating non-living thing. Many plants have fantastic form and when they are repeated in either a symmetrical formal manner or in a loose, rhythmic way, you get a composition that supports and softens the house and also hopefully steals a little well-deserved thunder from it. In my case, it stole much of the thunder since my house was downright ugly for a long time before I was able to change the paint and the roof.

The early garden had a cheerful cottage-y, incohesive look the first few years that wore thin on me (and probably also the neighbors), but the bulkier key players for plant structure started to create some unity and weight to the fluffy mess after about three years. These indispensable plants included compact selections of pines and hardy boxwood cultivars, which once they reached respectable size, held their place visually year round. Deciduous yellow-, orange-, and red-leaved barberries brought foliage color contrast and fine texture during the growing season. A number of common small *Spiraea* selections with

chartreuse foliage that emerges orange and then turns orange once again in the autumn, also helped unify the space. I planted about a dozen interspecific hybrid peonies to serve as a bold foliage theme and to offer fleeting but incomparable blossoms in late spring. These plants are relatively new to the trade and have the hardiness of their herbaceous peony parent and the scrumptious foliage and beautiful yellow, peach and amber hues harking from their tree peony parent. They are expensive but will probably outlive the gardener in most cases.

### THROUGH THE SEASONS: EARLY BEAUTY

My biggest success in this little front garden has been its year-round appeal. This took a number of years to hone and came about not entirely on purpose. I’m a big believer in adding more of what thrives and what I really like. Doing this creates themes,





In June the garden has bulked up and filled in, with soft yellow intersectional hybrid peonies, long-blooming 'Totally Tangerine' Geum, lavender Allium cristophii, and chartreuse lady's mantle (*Alchemilla vulgaris*) at path's edge.

unity, and seasonal waves of color. Early spring was dubbed my "blue period" by one of the complimentary neighbors; a sea of small starry blue-flowered bulbs all related to squill blooms in late March and early April. I planted several thousand of these my first few falls and then they took care of the rest, seeding and multiplying into great pools of blue that shimmer for about two or three weeks early in the season when all of us living in regions with long winters are absolutely desperate for some colorful sign of life. These lovely plants hark from cold harsh regions in the mountains of Europe and similar high-elevation regions of the near East, where they make use of abundant spring moisture from snow melt to grow and bloom and then go dormant before the dry sunbaked summers begin. *Scilla*, *Puschkinia*, *Chionodoxa*—some now with new-fangled names the taxonomic splitters have recently foisted on us—are at home in the climate, moisture regime, and soils of northern Colorado and much of the interior West.

On the heels of the "blue period" come the daffodils, which were planted at the same time in deeper layers of the same holes as the

squill tribe. I've loved daffodils since before I could talk; my mother had photos of me toddling through and picking from naturalized plantings of these lovely flowers near our home in Philadelphia. I can't imagine a garden of mine without them. In the front garden I went with brighter-colored selections while the larger, more serene back garden meadow area hosts pale yellows and whites. The bright golds and oranges of the front garden daffs mingle with emerging yellow and chartreuse foliage of various plants and the orange unfurling leaves of the barberries and spiraeas. If you choose a dozen or so daffodil selections noted for vigor and persistence and pick early, mid-season, and late bloomers, you can have six weeks to two months of daffodils in bloom each spring for decades, and cut flowers for the house as well. Daffodils are my number one spring elixir, inside and out, after the mercilessly long Colorado winter.

Then comes late spring, when the pale fresh greens expand and "chartreusosity" takes over the garden. Cushion spurge (*Euphorbia polychroma*) with its acid yellow flowers and bracts, an overly generous seeder in



By the driveway, slightly faded *Spiraea* and lady's mantle pass the August baton to a surprisingly hardy heirloom strain of exotic South African lily of the Nile (*Agapanthus campanulatus*) blooming profusely alongside tiger lilies.

watered gardens, is welcome nevertheless in this smaller, well-controlled garden area, as is self-sowing similarly hued biennial *Smyrnium perfoliatum*. Lady's mantle (*Alchemilla vulgaris*) and a giant hardy clumping asparagus—an heirloom German garden plant called 'Spitzenschleier' or 'Lace Veil' (*Asparagus pseudosaber*) and the lime-hued furry 'Primrose Heron' lamb's ear are major players, as is variegated non-spreading giant comfrey (*Symphytum x uplandicum* 'Axminster Gold'), a favorite with bumblebees. Golden-leaved forms of thyme, oregano, and moneywort, as well as bronze-tipped yellow 'Angelina' *Sedum rupestre* gild the ground plane.

#### SUMMER AND FALL

Blue comes back to play in late May, as several large clumps of cranesbill *Geranium* 'Rozanne' begin their five months of bloom. Purple alliums make a crowd of lollipop heads throughout the garden, having self-sown for almost a decade. The earliest blooming daylilies are species rather than hybrids: apricot-colored *Hemerocallis dumortieri* and *H. middendorffianum* open their gracefully tubular flowers alongside deeper orange



Heirloom orange tiger lilies (*Lilium lancifolium*), blue sea holly (*Eryngium planum*) and daylilies bloom unperturbed by the heat of high summer against a backdrop of purple-leaved barberry and compact Tanyosho pine (*Pinus densiflora* 'Umbraculifera Compacta').

long-blooming *Geum* 'Totally Tangerine'. Soft butter-yellow Jerusalem sage (*Phlomis russeliana*), which I introduced to the regional trade back in the early 1990s from seed I had saved while working in Ireland and England, is one of my all-time favorite perennials. The tiered flowers are so architectural, the large felted olive-green leaves are so handsome that I made a theme of this plant, repeating it throughout the front. Bumblebees favor the flowers as well. And now the dozen or so interspecific peony hybrids take their two-week-long role as unchallenged stars of the garden.

As summer heats up, blue sea holly (*Eryngium planum*) and long-flowering and reliably hardy 'Alcazar' *Kniphofia* carry on for well over a month, hosting enthusiastic pollinators including beneficial wasps and hummingbirds. Several dozen old-fashioned orange tiger lilies (*Lilium lancifolium*) add more orange in late July. As the dog days of August settle in, sea lavender (*Limonium platyphyllum*) opens its lavender floral clouds in front of tall altissima daylilies (*Hemerocallis altissima* hybrids) and my favorite yellow species, *H. multiflora*, with dozens of small

trumpets on elegant much-branched scapes. An amazingly hardy heirloom sky-blue selection of lily of the Nile (*Agapanthus campanulatus*) that I bought years ago from the now-defunct upstate New York nursery Seneca Hill has grown into a 3-foot patch by the mailbox, with several dozen blooming stems now, also superb for cutting. I have started to propagate it successfully from seed in hopes to get it into the regional trade in a few years.

Come fall, rich warm colors emanate from leaves rather than flowers, with orange, red, and gold foliage throughout the front as the spiraeas, barberries, and prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) go fiery. A reprise of bulb bloom washes over the garden when hundreds of glowing lavender chalices of autumn crocus (*Crocus speciosus*) open. This species does best in the moister more temperate front garden, while its spring-blooming crocus brethren prefer the hot dry sunny south and west garden areas. Then a series of snowfalls extinguish all bloom, the freeze-dried blonde tassels of grasses chatter in the cold breeze, and it's time for the quiet deep green hues of boxwoods and dwarf pines to reign until the blue period begins once again. 🍷



Autumnal amber and red hues of prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) and cushion spurge mingle with the evergreen spikes of striped 'Bright Edge' Yucca and the deep restful green of similarly evergreen hardy boxwood.