



Au Naturel Landscapes

Fiddleheads Native Landscaping in Chattanooga incorporates plants indigenous to Tennessee, creating eco-friendly yards and gardens with plenty of aesthetic appeal. TEXT Willow Nero | PHOTOGRAPHY Courtesy of Fiddleheads Native Landscaping

Chattanooga landscaper and owner of Fiddleheads Native Landscaping Michael Phillips knows the damage that a few seemingly innocuous decorative vines can wreak on Tennessee homes and gardens.

While many of his jobs are in new-construction neighborhoods, he saved one Chattanooga podiatrist's home from complete engulfment by invasive species.

"I purchased a 60-year-old home that was horribly overgrown with English ivy and was in desperate need of a complete makeover," says client Angela Smith. "There was ivy growing inside the sunroom—it was knee-deep in ivy, and I'm not exaggerating. There was a terrace wall that was not even visible."

Luckily, Phillips was able to clear that overgrowth and conceptualize a natural setting for Smith's new home.

"It's a look that a lot of people

like. Around here we've got a lot of mountainous terrain, and you can make it look like the home was set back in its natural environment, but it also looks managed and manicured at the same time," says the University of Tennessee alum, referencing the many interesting cultivars of plants found in the Smoky Mountains.

Unfortunately, exotic plant species can be intriguing and tempting to homeowners.

"When you plant exotic plants like privet or English ivy, you're introducing a plant that's not natural to Tennessee," explains Phillips. "Say a bird eats berries from the privet and that shrub's going to start growing, and it's going to take over the natural plants and take over the native species."

For Smith, the idea to go natural just fit with her old house.

"I did not want it to look like a freshly landscaped yard," she says. "I did not want perfect grass and perfect everything. I wanted to work

with the 100-year-old oak trees."

Phillips started somewhat from scratch on Smith's garden, but was able to save some older azaleas and dogwoods on the property.

"He basically had to use his imagination," Smith says, recalling her own inability to see past the massive overgrowth.

The imagination is Phillips' favorite part of the process.

"It's hard for people to know what I'm thinking before it's put together and installed," he says.

Phillips also worked with Smith's fluctuating budget; the young doctor was simultaneously building her practice, River City Podiatry, so the two gradually added a retaining wall and irrigation system.

Going green? Go native

In addition to preserving natural wildlife, native plants generally require less watering and upkeep than exotic species, and they add points for homeowners looking for a Leadership in Energy and

home and garden

Environmental Design (LEED) certification.

"Once it's established (the native plants) just kind of take care of themselves and colonize the area," Phillips says.

Fiddleheads recently collaborated on the Madison Moderns project (madisonmoderns.com), the first group of LEED-certified homes in Chattanooga and the winner of the 2009 Green Development of the Year award from the American Planning Association's Tennessee Chapter.

The almost sci-fi-like homes incorporate nearly every aspect of green design from the locally manufactured materials within them to the orientation of their rooftops and the development's location in a pedestrian-friendly district.

But before green was the norm, Phillips and his wife and early business partner Natalie went native on the advice of a UT professor.

"When we first started, it set us apart from everybody else, and now everybody is into the sustainable green movement," Phillips said.

Their business name and logo echoes native beauty as well. A fiddlehead is the common name of the edible first growth on a fern, another Tennessee native.

If you're looking to do some indigenous landscaping, Phillips recommends thinking about your goals now, but it's still too early to plant. The best season for trees and shrubs is early winter.

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