

HOME&GARDEN

Transforming a mud pit into an outdoor paradise

With the yard deemed useless, homeowners called landscape pros

By Dean Bartoli Smith
Special to The Examiner

Moving into their home in 2001, Sam and Eric Smith of Aspen Hill knew they faced a challenge with a sloping backyard and beech trees that provided dense shade. When it rained, the area turned into a mudslide. The Smiths tried growing grass — even shade grass — to no avail. Rain had washed away the topsoil. They needed a place for their two young children to play. A garden was out of the question. The entire yard was useless.

“It would take five minutes for the rain to come down through the trees,” said Sam Smith. “Then we would watch the chaos. It was a mud pit.”

Working with Evan Brown of The Landscapers, the couple developed a staged approach to correct the problem — with places for the children to play and the parents to entertain.

“They drew their own designs,” said Brown, “and they were very hands on.” Sam is a computer designer and Eric works in IT.

At the top of the slope, a pondless waterfall made of rounded tan stone blocks flows into a basin of loose stones to help with the drainage.

Winding brick pathways section the quadrant into spaces for a sandbox and a shed. St. John’s wort, hydrangea, heavenly bamboo, Virginia creeper, climbing roses, and



BEFORE

Sam and Eric Smith’s Aspen Hill backyard sloped and turned into a mudslide when it rained. After trying several things to fix the problem, they decided to turn their useless yard into an outdoor room.

ferns — including autumn, ostrich, and Christmas — fill in the areas. The massive beech trees at the back of the property are linked by a hammock.

“The beech trees are great,” said Eric Smith. “I wanted a koi pond for the kids, but the stones are better for drainage.”

They transformed the lower patio area into a formal outdoor living room partitioned off from the rest of the yard by a standalone fireplace. Going for earth tones, they selected “South Bay” building stones for the sitting wall and fireplace and lighter colored Copper Bay flagstones from China for the patio. The sitting wall features an inset grill.

A ceramic-and-steel, face-of-the-sun artwork punctuates the relaxing spirit of the landscape design.

“It gave us an outside room that we could enjoy and entertain in,” said Sam. “We love our fireplace, inbuilt grill, and all the stonework. The fireplace was something we decided to add later on into the plans. I’m glad we did.”

Hand built by Brown, the flagstone fireplace presented several challenges. On one side, it supports an arbor made of cedar wood from Alaska and it couldn’t generate too much heat or it would burn the wood.

Evan researched fireplaces and modeled it after the Orson fireplace system, but had to create his own design because of its size and the angle on the property. Brown sculpted and poured the concrete mantel and built a pocket to store wood underneath with a metal frame to support the whole structure.

“We call it ‘The Brown Fireplace System,’” said Brown. “We had to wait two weeks to light it. I was praying that the smoke would travel up.”

It did. Now, there is abundant outdoor space for the children to explore nature and for the adults to invite friends over and entertain at the same time.



AFTER Now that the sloping backyard has been transformed into a formal outdoor living room with a standing fireplace, there is abundant outdoor space for the Smith children to play and for the adults to entertain guests.

Resources

- » **Contractor:**
The Landscapers LLC
- » **Outdoor furniture:**
Smith & Hawken
- » **Stone:**
Charles Luck Stone Inc.



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