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Take time to give your slope curve appeal

By **Elise Oberliesen, Special to the News**
July 2, 2005

With no shortage of gently rolling landscapes in Colorado, homeowners are getting creative in the yard. Hilly property offers landscaping challenges and dramatic results. Terraced landscapes have angular slopes with flat surfaces for planting. Designing one takes a little imagination and a lot of patience.

SuAnna Jo Schamper created a flowing rock bed in her sloped yard. The stunning garden people see today took about 2 1/2 summers to create. And she had lots of help with her backyard paradise.

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Hauling tons of landscaping material became a second job for Schamper, who had help from her brothers and friends. But the results are worth it, she says.

Erosion and runoff are common problems associated with sloped yards. Boxing out sections of earth is one way to create a flat surface. The method breaks the slope into shorter segments and allows water to seep into the ground more easily.

Ideas are practically endless when landscaping a hillside, says

Kathryn Murphy, an employee at Abners Garden Center in Wheat Ridge.

"You don't necessarily have to put cactus up there," Murphy says.

Add a trickling water feature and the back yard is an instant oasis. Murphy recommends a pondless waterfall. A gravel-based reservoir holds water at the bottom while a pump transports water uphill.

She says you're at an advantage with a slope because all that height means you won't have to bring in extra soil and rock to build up the waterfall.

Murphy says designing a walkway up to a tiered garden adds easy access.

That's just what Schamper had in mind when she mapped out her walkways. Schamper no longer worries if her hose will reach far enough. Instead of trampling across plants for watering and feeding rituals she planned pathways and plant locations with care.

"I put higher-maintenance plants closer to the house," she says.

Drought-tolerant plants like Russian sage also help Schamper cut down on water.

"I haven't watered the lower gardens since the first summer," Schamper says.

Other than roses, she says, maintenance is fairly low.

Ross Shrigley, horticulturist at Denver Botanic Gardens, advises people to allow plenty of time for a successful terracing project. Speedy work doesn't usually result in spectacular gardens.

"The faster you go, the more you compromise the looks," Shrigley says.

Fads come and go, so opt for a design that will stand the test of time. Stair-steps aren't as popular these days as the softer undulating look.

"Curved walls are more appealing; that's more the design that's in," Shrigley says.

If you opt for curves, be prepared to spend more time, says Shrigley. Rounded lines can be a tricky design task.

Hauling tons of earth and rock is grueling work, so pick cooler days.

"Working with stone on hot days seems to make it extra hard," Shrigley says.

If this back-breaking work doesn't sound fun, consider a grassy slope. That's just what Rich Jaeger, a Westminster resident, did with

his yard. Wildflower and heavy brougham grass blanket the rise and fall of his rolling hill.

However, planting seeds on a downward slant is challenging. Jaeger says coconut matting is the best bet.

"You stake it down to the ground and seed on top of it," Jaeger said.

That grassy natural look means occasional mowing. One thing Jaeger cannot live without is his riding mower.

The center of gravity is a little different while mowing on an angle. Shop wisely when buying a riding mower.

And beware of shifty earth, he says.

It's a nightmare when all that artistically placed plant material and rock fall down the hill. It can happen when the rain gods dump torrential downpours or the soil expands and contracts during freeze-thaw periods.

As a heavy equipment operator, Jaeger knows how to check the earth for signs that could spell damage.

"If you see a deep crack in your lawn, it is an indication that you're going to have a slide."

Building one tier into the hillside helps prevent sliding, says Jaeger.

Although multitiers are "aesthetically pleasing," Jaeger says, they can be costly to build.

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