

June 10, 2005, 8:13PM

PATH TO ENLIGHTMENT

Delights abound in garden with tight space

By **CLIFFORD PUGH**

Copyright 2005 Houston Chronicle

When Pam and Carl Johnson built a new home in Houston's Museum District five years ago, they didn't leave room for a big yard.

But with the help of rare and native-plant expert Will Fleming, Pam turned a narrow space along the side of the house into a Zen-like garden path.

"I wanted a 'walking garden' so I could meditate and chill," says Pam, an artist who incorporates details of historical botanical illustrations into her drawings.

The secret garden, which is only about 8 feet at its widest point, is bisected by a stone pathway that runs the length of the house and is enclosed by a vine-covered fence.

On both sides of the pathway, Fleming layered several species of ferns amid other green plants of different textures and forms. Plants that bloom at different times of the year — toad lilies, antique irises, blue-eyed grass and peacock ginger — were also mixed in to add a dash of color.

"It was done with noncommercial and hard-to-find plants, which makes it more interesting," Fleming says. "It's a garden more than a landscape."

Pam is constantly amazed by the many varieties of plants that share the small space. "What keeps me engaged is there are 10 different things in a 3-foot area," she says.

Walking irises, mother ferns and Texas native columbines share a small space near the garden entrance. They're planted under a Japanese maple with a sculptural ball hanging from a limb that will help the tree "lean" naturally as it grows.

Kampheria (peacock) ginger lines part of the stone path. During the summer the ginger blooms with small violet flowers.

"The tropicals, like kampheria, love heat," Fleming explains. "It has to be warm at night for them to bloom. They go dormant when it gets cool in the autumn."

Farther down the garden path, several spiky red blood lilies add a jolt of color. Plants that are unusual to Houston but grow well in the climate, such as a large needle palm, which Fleming calls the "hadiest palm in the world," and a Mexican oak tree, are planted in strategic locations.

Asian vegetable ferns grow just to window height of the house, so they don't obscure the view of the garden from inside.

Cephalotaxus, a heat- and shade-tolerant evergreen, provides ground cover in some places. Fleming also recently introduced achimenes, a flowering ground cover that is related to African violets and gloxinias.



Bruce Bennett/For the Chronicle
Pam Johnson often chills out by tending the garden.

"It's a summer detail plant for the shade," he says.

Pam also layered in caladiums and impatiens to add color.

Fleming, based in Hempstead, says gardeners in search of unusual varieties of plants should seek out smaller nurseries, where owners are often passionate about rare plants.

And they should pay attention to the soil. "There's a lot of organic matter worked into this soil," he says. "One-half of the job is in the bed work."

Even though the garden has a natural look, it takes a lot of loving care to maintain.

"I'll pull probably a bag a week of stuff out of the walking garden and back yard. It's a constant culling. I'm always combing through, pulling dead stuff and making cuttings," Pam says.

She often gives cuttings to friends, following Fleming's advice. "When he planted it, he knew it would grow profusely," she recalls. "He said, don't throw it away, give it to a friend."

Even though the garden has a sprinkler system, Pam prefers to hand water because she treasures every moment in her special garden.

"It is constant maintenance, but I don't exhaust myself. This is manageable. You stroll. It becomes its own little environment. I think people get overwhelmed with large spaces and they don't care anymore. This feels right."

clifford.pugh@chron.com