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JOE SALERNO DESIGNS GREEN "ROOMS" OUTDOORS

Pat Terry

Landscape designer Joe Salerno is well known for his stunning yardscapes, utilizing waterfalls, streams and ponds to create colorful, textured green "rooms" outdoors.

"People are spending more time at home, and the yard has become an extension of their homes," says the innovative young designer. "Many of the people we work for don't want to sell their houses and move. Instead, they are expanding their homes outdoors."

Salerno expanded his own living space, in suburban Wheaton, by wrapping it 360 degrees with a series of outdoor rooms. Integrating color and texture – trees, shrubs, grasses and flowers – with sound and movement in the ponds, stream and waterfalls, he has created the feel of a lush, low-key jungle resort.

The landscape designer's "rooms" include:

- An outdoor kitchen, replete with grills, waterfall, bar table and stools;
- A seating area just outside the master bedroom, overlooking pond and waterfall;
- A small, serene table and chairs looking onto the pond and the double waterfall, set in a nook of the house and guarded by a life-size, sculpted Xian warrior;
- A private dining area on the lower terrace with its own pondless waterfall;
- And the pièce de résistance: An upper level patio/terrace, sporting colorful handpainted tables and chairs. Joe loves to cook for friends, so the outdoor entertaining area visually flows into his kitchen through an all-glass kitchen door.

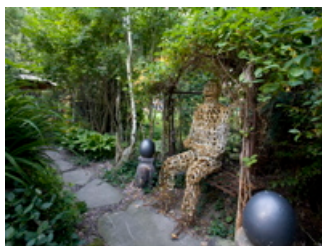
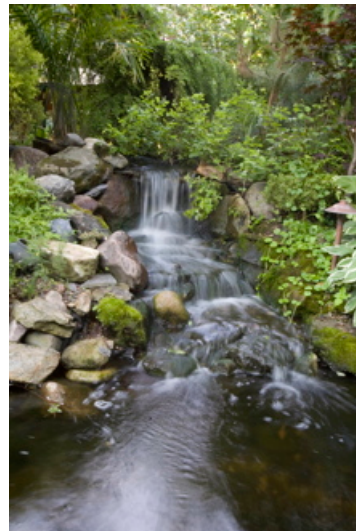
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There is not a blade of grass in most Salerno landscapes—deliberately.

"Everyone has to cut their lawn every week, and gas lawnmowers create more toxins than cars," he says. "Landscaping with plants, instead, turns carbon monoxide into an oxygen-rich environment." Traditional fertilizers, which leech chemicals into our water systems, are another reason to move away from grass.

No surprise, then, that Salerno opts for organic fertilizer and avoids pesticides.

"I have never sprayed my backyard in 20 years," he says. "I don't need to. Plants are like people: If you're healthy you don't get sick. If you're rundown, you can get sick."

His formula for healthy plants...use organic fertilizers, and keep the plants watered.

"A lack of water puts stress on the plant, and the leaves start to dehydrate. Then it's very

easy to get sick because their tolerance is down,” he says. “If you don’t fertilize, if plants don’t have all the balance and nutrients they need, they have a tendency to be weaker. Then they can attract bugs, different funguses.

Salerno says gardeners have a choice with their watering: “Be proactive and set your irrigation every couple days to keep the moisture level consistent – or you can depend on God. The problem is, God waters too much today, then the next five weeks, nothing,” he laughs.

As for fertilizers, the landscaper goes for organic, for many environmental reasons. But it’s also because the passionate Italian chef loves vegetables and mixes a lot of them into his landscapes, both for character (think of the big purple cabbage) and for actual consumption.

“If I mix in a zucchini here and, instead of a trailing vinca vine, I have trailing watermelons and pumpkins and cucumbers, it’s fun, it’s a conversation piece, yet you’re utilizing all your space,” says Salerno, whose front yard includes two onion crops – one for harvest, one to leave for the second year when it flowers – as well as garlic and asparagus.

And he doesn’t like chemicals in his food – another reason for gardening green.

“To me, whether it be something I’m consuming or something I’m just taking care of, why use something that’s manufactured when I can use something that’s natural?”

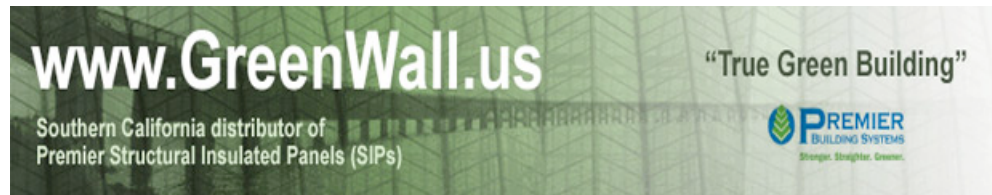
Although the landscape designer believes firmly in his approach, he concedes that many people believe doing something innovative – like skipping the grass and going green – has to be more expensive, so they avoid changing.

“But showing people the value can make a difference,” he stresses. “If you said, ‘OK, if you didn’t have to cut your lawn, you first save the time, the gas, the environment. Now, you put in a plant that has color, texture, fragrance and beauty, And basically all you have to do is have it watered, which is the same thing you have to do for your lawn or else it turns brown.’

“So the benefit of what you’re getting is huge,” stresses Salerno. “It’s just that people are so stuck in this box of having a lawn.”

Photography by Bethany Fritz

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