

Going green need not be daunting

Two local property owners show that “going green” does not have to break the bank or your back. Using simple ideas, they have transformed a home and a landscape.

By Taitia Shelow

The concept of “going green” appeals to many homeowners, especially since making homes more energy efficient can save money as well as the Earth. But often the cost or work involved in going green seems prohibitive and intimidating.

Two local property owners who have undertaken large projects inside and outside their homes demonstrate, however, that with careful planning and research it is possible to create a greener environment without breaking the bank or your back.

From poop to pearl: Reclaiming a village eyesore

Adam Black, partner in an eco-oriented TV and media production company based in New York City, wanted to undertake a hands-on “green” renovation project and purposefully sought a home in poor condition. His search led him to a foreclosed property on Wentworth Court, a side lane off Murray Street in Chatham village. The 850-square-foot cottage on a 71-by-30 foot lot had no electricity or gutters, was marred by interior water damage and mold, and was literally sagging outward.

“I wanted to turn poop into a pearl. My motivation was to demonstrate by action and have people say ‘I can do that, too.’ You only learn by doing.”

After an initial \$20,000 investment, four months of work and \$80,000 in renovations, Black and his wife Cammie now have a two bedroom, two bath rental property worth about \$150,000. Almost every inch has an environmentally friendly aspect. The house may qualify for LEED certification, (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), a standard used in green building design.

“The reality is this house should have been torn down,” said Black. “But if you consider all the aspects – demolition and removal costs, the dirt and waste, and all new materials – it’s not very ‘green’ to destroy a house.”

Black knew his limits, though. He was the developer, working with architect Alan Baer of Kingston, and the contractors plus planning the budget and sourcing materials. He did what he could himself but left the big stuff to the experts, hiring Energy Construction, LLC in Ravena for the bulk of the work.

“I don’t believe in build it yourself. But a lot of the ideas are mine. I would recommend that,” Black said. “I knew what I wanted and when I didn’t know I asked.”

Baer has done projects large and small but always tries to go as “green” as possible. Not all homes have the potential to be renovated this way, he added. He helped Black search for the right property.

“A lot of people would have given up on this poor house and said it’s not worth it. Adam saw the inherent potential,” Baer said.

“We did everything we did to be as green as possible. Our intent was to later see if it meets LEED standards.”

Beyond the green aspect, two main tenets guided the process: think simple and inexpensive. Often the two tied together. Black also weighed the cost of items beyond the actual price. For example, instead of buying a costly 90 percent efficient gas stove to heat the main living area, he purchased one with an 85 percent efficiency and installed fans at key areas to circulate the heat.

“If you’re trying to save money, resources



The outside after, above, and before, below.

The rain chain made from 50 cent pots.

The front step and mud room with black river stone for warmth and safety.



and the environment, you’ve got to think about the whole system. You could do a system with zero energy use but the lifestyle you’d need to maintain it would make the system unsustainable. If you make the price more just to be green you’re not doing any good.”

Consider the cost of recycling a material as well, added Baer: “Think about things that can be recycled without reinventing the material, because once you start fiddling, you could negate the effort.”

Sagging walls

First on the agenda at Wentworth Court was pulling together the sagging cottage walls. They installed a post and beam in the middle of the first floor and used cables to pull the walls into an upright position. The cost was \$250 – less than the price to haul demolition rubbish away, noted Black.

Inside, many of the pieces are recycled, including the toilets, wooden floors and the washer/dryer combo. A 1930s wooden cabinet became the vanity in the downstairs half-bath, and Black nabbed a kitchen sink worth \$450 for \$50 on Craig’s List.

“We got a lot of things off Craig’s List,” he noted, adding that he also scoured local stores like Herrington’s and Ghent Wood Products

where he purchased left over materials for a fraction of the price. Another aspect of green building is using materials from within a short distance of the project.

The kitchen/living room area downstairs is separated by a wooden plank counter, which consists of three pieces that can be folded or even removed to open up the space. “Small house design is about flexible design,” Black explained.

The staircase railings and posts are bamboo, a tougher, lighter, cheaper and more environmentally friendly alternative to wood. The entire second floor comprises the master bedroom and bath. The room was transformed from dismal to an area bathed in natural light, thanks to windows on each end augmented by 12 dimmable fluorescent ceiling lights.

Japanese shoji doors that Black purchased for \$100 each (as opposed to \$2,000) because they were slightly damaged slide open to reveal the closet on one side and bathroom opposite. Though small, the bathroom contains sink, toilet, tub and shower (also recycled) with amenities like a heated floor and Velux windows. Black can lie in his tub and watch the TV across the room just by sliding open the door.

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Creative use of different sized native grasses give Horn's home an artistic flair.

"You don't need more space, you just need to organize it well."

One place Black didn't compromise was in the doors and windows, since they are key to energy efficiency. He purchased good quality pieces. The windows are double-glazed and whenever possible face south to maximize sunlight. Soy-based insulation was blown into the walls and floors.

Black put as much thought into the outside as the interior. Around the home's foundation, he placed matting to block weeds and topped it with decorative stones. He used galvanized steel for gutters because it lasts longer. The concrete front step and landing into the mud-room contain black river stones that serve dual purposes – they make the surface less slippery in the winter and absorb sunlight and warmth. The outdoor oil tank was an eyesore, so the Blacks sold the oil and cut up and recycled the tank metal. They used the money to convert the house to natural gas.

"A lot of our thinking was how you do things easily, simple."

One of the most interesting and unique touches outside is a "rain chain." The chain is made from a series of metal buckets (50 cents each) wired together and hanging from the end of the gutter. Larger pots on the top and bottom of the chain contain wire mesh that filter out sediment.

"Just simple little things create enormous value."

Black qualified for a 10-year NYSERDA (New York State Energy Research and Development Authority) loan with 1.5 percent interest, so borrowed almost \$20,000 for a monthly payment of about \$171. Working with a condemned home made the process more difficult than for an average homeowner doing renovations, a fact Black made known to NYSERDA when they visited his cottage.

The Blacks have a website with dozens of photos from the renovation at: <http://web.me.com/adamblack50/Site>. They welcome people to see the home, by appointment; send an email to Adam@key-wifi.com or call him at 646-508-2975.

Reclaiming a Spencertown landscape

Artist Linda Horn took a literal approach to going green, returning the 7.5-acre landscape surrounding her Spencertown home to its native roots – plants and grasses indigenous to the northeastern climate.

When she and husband Allan Davidson purchased the property seven years ago, it was designed in the style of Japanese gardens by the previous owners. The unusual property includes several types of landscapes. A home and separate studio sit on a ledge overlooking a waterfall and meadow, with a series of stone paths and steep steps surrounding the buildings, and a wooded area as well.

"Bamboo was a big design element (on the property). It's not native and it tends to take over," explained Horn.

Among the other landscaping features were five-foot high perennials, a wall of spirea bushes and 80 rose bushes, all of which Horn removed. While they were attractive, they didn't provide much sustenance for local wildlife and required extensive maintenance.

"It was work I wasn't willing to do anymore – spend my life landscaping," she said.

"I looked at this from the point of view that I didn't have the time or energy to manage this. So I started to progressively replace things, putting in plants and grasses I could manage."

Horn's interest in landscaping began years ago while she was living in the Midwest, where the movement to return land to native species is more advanced than here. She owned 65 acres in Michigan, and after attending a lecture on large landscape management became inspired. The lecture focused on how people



try to control their landscape to the point it becomes detrimental to nature. The lecture was led by Joyce Powers, an ecologist with a degree in botany who had been working in the Midwest for her entire career.

"She showed slides of installed prairies she had done and that was it for me. I did a five-acre tall grass prairie in Michigan before moving here to do my one-acre meadow," Horn said. "I'm not a purist, but I feel we're obliged to put in plants that feed native birds and insects."

She added that property owners often don't realize native plants are easier to maintain, "because these plants are genetically equipped to handle the weather." They are also better for the soil and grow deep roots.

Chatham-based landscaper Wendy Carroll, as well as Internet research and catalogs selling native species, helped Horn transform her Spencertown property. Now her home and studio are surrounded by prairie drop seed grass and catmint ("which bees absolutely love"), elderberry and American cranberry bushes are slowly replacing other species as they die off, and the bamboo is gone. Horn chose to plant four grasses of different sizes close to the house, and the resulting layered effect adds an artistic flair. And other than the occasional clipping, she doesn't have much maintenance to perform.

Even the waterfall area behind the home is being reclaimed by nature. The previous owners had dredged the pool below the falls to create an island.

"I'm letting nature take it back. The island is slowly going away," observed Horn.

"Whatever it becomes is fine with me."

Her biggest project has been creating a native meadow in the one-acre field her home looks down upon. This project requires periodic controlled burning by professionals and is probably more than the typical homeowner

would undertake, said Horn. But she's enjoyed the challenge of creating an ecosystem from scratch.

"I love it; it's challenging and I have an enormous amount of pleasure from the unpredictability of it."

For homeowners who want to undertake a simpler transformation, Horn said it's most practical to start in the area immediately surrounding your home. Research is key to finding the right native plants and is made much easier by the breadth of the Internet.

Simple grasses

Grasses are one of the easiest items to start with and take only one season to get going.

"And they're pretty much self-sustaining. You don't have to fertilize them, you don't have to weed them, you don't have to water them and you don't have to mow them. There are other solutions with native grasses if you want a lawn effect."

A small area is easier to do in plugs than seeds, Horn added. Nurseries that sell native plants through catalogs – Prairie Moon Nursery is one example – sell a flat of 80 for about \$100 and can help you determine how many you need based on lawn size.

Most local landscaping stores don't sell native plants, unfortunately, but a group of women in Great Barrington, Mass., are forming one such business. Horn hopes the concept catches on as more people become conscious of "going green" not just inside their home but outside as well.

Her main piece of advice is to educate oneself before starting. "It's all in the books. Before you spend the money, find out what you need to know. Information is power. The answers are here, it's just a matter of educating people." Pictures of Linda Horn's property can be viewed on her website www.lindabhorn.com. Click on the Terra Constructa link.

The waterfall behind Horn's house. She is letting nature reclaim the island previous owners had dredged.