

The Iannotti's multilevel patio covers nearly 2,000 square feet of the family's 3-acre lot.



Natural Escapes

See how three homeowners built comfort, luxury and privacy by adopting the great outdoors as an al fresco living space.

By Kristen Hampshire

Dr. Joseph Iannotti's backyard is his indulgence.

He calls the time he spends putting around, hosing off the patio or watching the pond full of enormous Koi fish "light recreation."

"I've always enjoyed the outdoors as an escape route," he says. So he converted an outdated deck attached to his Strongsville home into an entertainment oasis.

Today, Iannotti says people jokingly call the finished project "the local park." His teenage daughter and her friends take advantage of the backdrop for prom pictures, and the barbecue pit has proven to be a draw for family and friends.

But the impressive space grew — bal-

looned, actually — from very different original plans. Decisions to add lighting and enlarge the patio to approximately 2,000 square feet came after ground was already broken on the project.

"We made a bunch of changes in the middle because everything seemed to get bigger," Iannotti explains. "You know, this patio wasn't big enough. Then this wall wasn't long enough, and I wanted different steps."

The 3-acre lot is secluded from other quarter- and half-acre properties in the subdivision by woods. Steep grades and uneven terrain presented initial challenges, so a sophisticated system of retaining walls and drainage tiles were used to pre-



A fountain and new walkway were added to the front of the Iannotti's home.

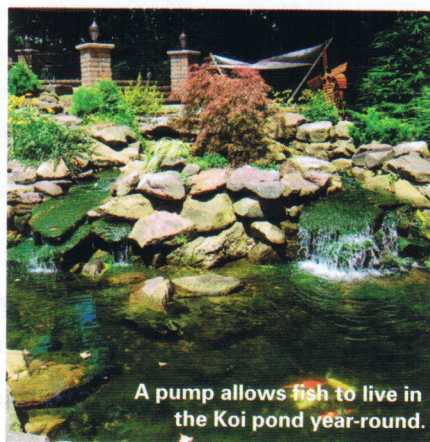
prepare the land for all the "dressing" Iannotti requested.

"We have lots of drainage behind those retaining walls, lots of backfill to support the retaining structure," explains Chas Moscarino, president of Moscarino Outdoor Creations, the Strongsville company behind Iannotti's backyard makeover. "The infrastructure of the project was a challenge, but the various levels are what make the project unique."

Establishing those layers meant first stripping the backyard to bare bones.

"When we started the project, it looked like a bomb went off in the backyard," Moscarino recalls. "But it slowly came together."

Of course there were surprises, such as the discovery of a century-old tree stump that needed to be removed to excavate a site for additional patio space. The preparations also included cleaning up the wood line and cutting back wayward branches that could fall on the



A pump allows fish to live in the Koi pond year-round.

house or prevent proper sunlight from reaching areas where plantings would be installed.

Iannotti's backyard slopes, creating a natural foundation for the home's three-level patio space. A waterfall with a rock bed tumbles down the hill into a Koi pond, which also grew in size with the rest of the project.

But maintaining a large pond with fish is a challenging task. The landscape crew spent a year tweaking water plants to reduce algae growth and establish a balanced aquaculture. (The Iannottis leave a water pump running all the time so fish can dwell in the pond year-round.)

Iannotti had a hot tub he purchased at the 2008 Home & Garden show installed in the backyard. Primarily a three-season feature, it did get some use this winter. But only when "I'm feeling bold," he says.

The home's previous deck had suffered from decay, and Iannotti knew maintaining the new, larger one would be a big task. So Moscarino built the new one using a poly material that looks like wood.

To give the large space a uniform look, rock used in the waterfall was incorporated throughout the landscape as outcroppings to stabilize planters and as decorative pieces along hilly areas, connecting the yard space beyond the patios with the focal point of the waterfall. Natural screening such as Colorado blue spruce help seclude the hot tub.

"We kept most of the soil dug up on-site and created privacy mounds for trees along the wood lines of the property," Moscarino explains. Perennials and roses add a pop of color to stone-laden areas, and lighting fixtures were added to the landscape to show off its after-hours appeal.

"You sit in that backyard," Moscarino says, "and you feel like you're at a resort."

EXPERT ADVICE

No project is executed without changes along the way, often because a landscape in progress sparks a homeowner's creativity. "I tell clients that nothing is set in stone," says Chas Moscarino, president of Moscarino Outdoor Creations in Strongsville. "I'll present different conceptual ideas, and together, we'll come up with a final plan."

► **1. Set a budget.** Determine a budget range during the planning phase. Share this with the contractor so he can present materials options that fall within these limits.

► **2. Draw the lines.** Ask your designer to map out the footprint of your landscape plan so you can better visualize the project. This exercise can help when setting a realistic budget. "I like to spray-paint areas and let clients get a feel for where everything will sit on the property to be sure they are comfortable with the plan," Moscarino says.

► **3. Expect extras.** "Whatever your budget is, figure adding 20 percent to it," Moscarino suggests.