

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

The dirt around new homes provides an inviting blank canvas

- Andrew Glazier, Special to The Chronicle
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Lisa and Kraig Tharp left San Francisco a few years ago to buy their own home in Sacramento, where new single-family detached homes were available.

When they moved in, their neighborhood appeared shockingly uniform, with all the houses the same or nearly the same color. The landscaping was also nearly uniform and was obviously recently planted.

There were also no mature trees. The biggest street trees were at most 6 feet tall. The only shade to be had was inside the homes, and the Sacramento sun was relentless.

The Tharps soon decided that they wanted to change the landscaping to reflect their needs and desires and, fortunately in their case, their development had no restrictions on what they could do. They knew they had the right to make the improvements they wanted in advance of buying their home, but not all buyers of new homes are familiar with what they and their neighbors are allowed to do, said Andrea Swanson, a landscape architect with Thomas Baak and Associates in Concord.

"Most new developments have a whole binder full of rules about what homeowners can and can't do with their property," said Swanson, who designs landscaping for housing developments and does custom landscape architecture for individual homeowners. She said she thought most homeowners don't read them before buying.

In general, the more expensive the development, the more homeowners are bound by rules that mandate uniformity, but there is a wide variety of policies in less-expensive neighborhoods, Swanson said. Developments with higher-density housing also tend to be less tolerant of individuality than those with more separation between units.

Condominium communities, for example, usually don't allow modifications to exteriors, including yards, walls and roofs, without approval from the homeowners' association architectural design committee, said Mark Marymee, director of corporate communications for Pulte Homes in Bloomfield Hills, Mich.

The Tharps, who bought in a modestly priced development in West Sacramento, made good use of their freedom to choose the look of their yard. Kraig Tharp was quick to plant a magnolia in the front. He also planted gardenias along the entryway, which welcome visitors with their pleasant fragrance.

Six months later, the Tharps planted shrubs in the front and built a large crescent-shaped mound in the backyard to give a sense of depth.

They hired a stonemason to build a curving wall that encourages guests to sit or to venture out into the yard to socialize.

Still later, they planted flowering sages (*Salvia greggii*) to provide color that attracts hummingbirds and butterflies, and scented geraniums (*Pelargoniums*) that grew quite large. When people sit at the stone bench, they invariably rub against the plants, releasing their scent.

About a year after the Tharps moved in, the street trees were 10 feet tall and the magnolia was developing into a stately tree. Lantana and a tea tree (*Leptospermum*) provide color near the entryway, and verbena and coral bells (*Heuchera*) provide low-growing color near the front door.

Swanson designed the landscaping for the Crystyl Ranch developments in Concord, where the homeowners' association has rules on what alterations can be made to homes and yards. Owners are required to petition the association to make certain changes, such as adding a fountain in the front yard or building a trellis.

The rules on changes to backyards are much less restrictive, although many changes must be cleared with the homeowners' association. Plans for pools and decks lead the list of conflicts with homeowner rules, with trellises and arbors a close second, Swanson said.

Swanson started the development with a unified street tree plan. The main street had one type of tree, the secondary streets had another and the cul-de-sac had a third. All of the trees were non-fruiting, neat, noninvasive, and easy on sidewalks and plumbing, and each lot has at least one tree.

The typical front yard has an evergreen with drought-tolerant, deer-resistant shrubs. The houses on hilltops have wind-resistant, sun-loving plants, and other houses have landscaping that works best in shady locations. Some tough plants, such as agapanthus, were installed before construction on the homes was finished.

Del Webb's Sun City retirement communities have a reputation for being fairly restrictive in what owners can do. However, Marcia Lloyd, an inveterate plant lover, says she's been able to build the garden of her dreams in the backyard of her home at Sun City Lincoln Hills near Auburn in Placer County.

Lloyd, who moved into her new home in December, had redwood, red oak, African sumac and crape myrtle trees planted by the developer and added a white dogwood and Chinese elm herself. The redwoods surround a fountain and a small pond that were installed as extra-cost options.

"With the redwoods, and the all-white foxgloves growing in among them, it looks like the fountain is tumbling out of the forest," Lloyd said.

Adding features such as patios and fountains can cost up to \$10,000 extra at Sun City Lincoln Hills, while new homeowners can spend up to about \$4,000 extra on plants and trees offered by the developer.

The development does have rules enforced by the homeowners' association, Lloyd said, including a ban on certain trees, such as fast-growing and disease-plagued Monterey pines, and "anything crawling up the walls in the front yard."

Dublin Ranch Villages is a community of attached homes priced from \$550,000 in Dublin. There, the developer, Toll Bros. Homes of Horsham, Pa., takes an active role in determining the development's total look.

Tony Craig, who designed the original landscaping, said he tried to echo the historic orchards of the area with his plantings of already-mature trees along the streets. In addition, he planted an understory of plant material that blooms in all four seasons so there is always something to see. He said he wanted contrasting plant textures to add visual interest.

Craig said he likes to plant taller shrubs near the base of structures and introduce smaller plants in front until there is interesting groundcover by the walkways. This way he has the maximum number of blooms and also softens the transition from wall to ground.

Craig also does hydro-seeding at the edge of the properties. A huge water truck sprays water and seed through a fire hose at a hillside. Huge areas can be planted this way. The spray contains native grass seed and drought-tolerant annuals.

Rules are rules

By the end of 2003, 249,000 developments housing 50 million people were governed by housing associations. In California, association developments account for more than 80 percent of new-home construction. All come with covenants, conditions and restrictions that govern use of both common and private property.

People who buy homes in these developments essentially pledge their private property as a guarantee of their good behavior (as defined by the covenants, conditions and restrictions as interpreted by the homeowners association board). Homeowners associations have a contractual right to place liens on the properties and homes of residents to enforce compliance with the CC&Rs.

Andrew Glazier is a landscaper and freelance writer. E-mail him at home@sfchronicle.com. Chronicle Staff Writer Rick Radin contributed to this story.

