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GREEN GUARDIANS

PROTECTIVE LANDSCAPING offers owners rock-solid peace of mind when homes stand by busy roads, sharp curves or bustling corners.

By NORA FIRESTONE | Correspondent

Jolted by the boom, Shawn Lemke ran into his home office to find a Ford Taurus in place of the west wall.

That January night in 2005, a neighborhood man had been drinking. Driving home, he turned from the busy Virginia Beach thoroughfare toward the Lemkes' street but careened across their lawn and into the house instead.

No one suffered serious injuries, Lemke said. The driver survived. Lemke had just exited the office, and his wife, Ashley, was out.

But "the crash affected me deeply," Lemke said. "I felt very vulnerable the night it happened. For months after the crash I just couldn't get settled at night."

That week, the couple learned they'd be expecting their first child.

"That really put a fire under us," Ashley Lemke recalled. The two couldn't imagine leaving their family open to a repeat incident.

"I started planting trees and stacking stones," said Lemke, a landscape designer. "Boulders. And large tree trunks! That eases my mind, especially now" that the office has become a nursery, he said.

Crashes of the like aren't uncommon.

Last month a car hit a home on Indian River Road in Norfolk, killing three of the six travelers. A Virginia Beach attorney's office recently took a hit and, last October, a tow truck pummeled a Norfolk home.

Corner lots, properties along busy roads and those at which a street ends may be especially susceptible to traffic issues.

The Lemkes' front yard now features a protective landscape with aesthetic appeal. An earthen wall at the corner stands 2 feet tall, ending "where most bumpers would hit," Lemke noted.

A layered design within the built-up bed adds dimension and includes pine, willow and crape myrtle trees, boulders and camellia bushes. The theme carries over to the exterior wall, which faces heavy traffic. There, a lush grouping of rose bushes, dogwood shrubs, flowering evergreens and more boulders add density that also helps buffer the road noise.

Lemke's personal experience has broadened his professional scope.

Through Beach Groundworks Inc., his landscaping company, he now advises other homeowners about protective landscapes. During the design process he addresses the paths from which stray motorists could approach.

Corner lots get "cut" by vehicles, and trucks can run right over raised beds and small shrubs, he said. For those spaces Lemke recommends large boulders, walls of concrete or stone and berms.

The overall goal, his wife added, is to create a more aesthetically pleasing barrier than common fencing or a plain hedgerow, both of which can hide an otherwise beautiful yard. Folks should consider loblolly pines, maple, oak and willow trees and low-maintenance evergreens, she said. Magnolias make great screens, she added, but cost more.

On a budget, purchase smaller, fast-growing trees, which offer some protection but cost less than larger trees, or buy a few mature trees and fill in with boulders and shrubs.

Also consider strategic placement of shade trees for energy conservation, she added, and use low-voltage outdoor lighting to increase visibility for drivers.

Creating walls and buffers not only helps protect property from vehicular damage by slowing down impeding vehicles, but "fast-growing evergreen trees can create a privacy screen or wall to block out sound and unsightly

views,” said Robin Williams, landscape designer and project manager at Nansemond Lawn & Garden Inc. in Suffolk.

She recommends arborvitae, Nellie R. Stevens holly, Leyland cypress and Wichita Blue juniper.

“However,” Williams added, “I prefer tiered plantings, using medium to large deciduous canopy trees, then smaller canopy/ under-story trees, followed by large evergreen shrubs, then smaller shrubs and, finally, perennials or herbaceous plants,” she said.

“Using a variety of plant materials not only creates a sound barrier but also a natural wildlife habitat that is more appealing to view as an evergreen wall,” she explained.

Ashley Lemke also recommends mixed Cryptomeria and eastern red cedar.

Matthew Lipkin, a North End Virginia Beach resident, doesn’t worry about a hit;. A feeder road separates his home from bustling Atlantic Avenue. The city installed oleander along the feeder road, and he added more of the tall, bushy plant along the side of his corner lot years ago.

But Lipkin, 54, does appreciate his privacy and quiet time.

Living along the Oceanfront road, he initially sought relief from beach-goers who parked in front of his home, spoiling his view, decreasing his privacy and tearing up his lawn.

He called on Lemke, who said he “bermed it up a little bit” and installed river rocks, boulders and plants at yard’s edge.

“After spending some time on the property we realized that sound and headlights were a problem, too,” Lemke recalled. And as he and his staff walked the yard they envisioned strategically-placed trees and shrubs to block views of the traffic from inside the home.

Lemke re-shaped the existing landscape using layered groupings of flowering plants, azaleas, crape myrtles and ornamental sea grasses.

Now Lipkin enjoys his privacy, views and tranquility. Water features can also be used to reduce unwanted noise.

“If someone has a very limited budget they can still do a lot,” Lemke said.

To replicate his own, including the price of design, materials and labor, would cost about \$5,000, but a do-it-yourselfer might spend half that.

To save money, choose natural stone over custom masonry; create dry-stacked walls using new, attractive and low-maintenance hardscape products on the market, he advised. Seek professional advice at online forums, home improvement stores and garden centers.

Know that retaining walls with a slight batter, or lean, offer more structural security than vertical walls and that some cities require an engineer’s involvement when building a wall taller than four feet, Lemke noted.

“People should do their homework,” Lemke said. Go to local nurseries and collect photographs and other visual references. Then consult with a professional landscaper – if not for the entire installation, for the design alone, which can often be purchased for a few hundred dollars, he said.

Noted Lemke: “Getting involved in the project is key” to its success.

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Shawn and Ashley Lemke built a protective barrier of hardscaping, such as this stone wall, and landscaping around their Virginia Beach home after a car crashed in the house in 2005.

LEFT AND AT BOTTOM RIGHT PHOTOS, ROSS TAYLOR | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT; BOTTOM LEFT PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LEMKES





The Lemkes, right, with baby Breckin, say they'll never forget the day a car crashed into their house. Shawn, owner of Beach Groundworks, installed a protective landscape on their corner lot.
