

Dilemma of severely sloping backyard meets creative solution.

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Shawn and Karin Flemming were excited when they purchased their acre lot in the expanding Springfield neighborhood in Fort Mill in 2011.

The couple envisioned a large home on a quiet cul-de-sac with an expansive backyard that included a pool and ample outdoor living space to accommodate their love of outdoor cooking, casual entertaining, and room to play for their son Austin, 7, and their dogs Sofi and CoCo.

Shawn, 44, co-founder of a Charlotte-based software development firm, and Karin, 37, who manages the couple's rental properties, knew the heavily wooded lot had a significant slope from the curb to the back of the lot. They didn't realize just how severe the fall-off was until after they cleared it and began to move forward with plans to build the house.

Shawn estimated the drop to be at least 15 feet, and there was a large gully that had opened as a result of rain drainage that was in the center of what would be their backyard.

And whatever solution they came up with needed to address drainage, aesthetics and utility.

"We really didn't want a basement," said Shawn Flemming, "And it was important to us to have clean sight lines to the back and not have this huge drop from the back of the house to a pool and kitchen area. We wanted a natural flow and extension from the house."

Raising the backyard

As they planned their outdoor living space with their home builder, Arthur Rutenberg Homes, the Flemmings

- Working with several contractors
 - One of the most pleasing aspects of working with these contractors was that "there was good communication and accountability from day one from everyone involved," homeowner Shawn Flemming said.
 - Be open and upfront with your contractors. Don't play one off the other or adopt an adversarial relationship. If you are honest and fair in your dealings with your vendors, they are more likely to act in kind.
 - Three-way meetings between owners and two contractors allow for everyone to hear the same thing at the same time and reach consensus on problems, schedules and responsibilities. As the owner, you should follow up with written summaries of understanding to avoid confusion at a later date.
 - Ogburn emphasized the importance of keeping his customers informed and up to speed. "We work very closely and in a detailed way with our clients so they know exactly what to expect," said Ogburn.

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were introduced to Overstream Poolsapes Inc. The Charlotte-area waterscape, landscape designer and builder would work on the outdoor living space plan.

The couple emphasized their desire to have a backyard pool/cabana area and outdoor kitchen along with a fireplace that was at or nearly the same level as the home.

“Our previous home in Baxter Village had a number of steps from the back of the house to the patio area and we didn’t want that,” said Karin. “The design obviously called for a retaining wall and fencing for the pool and to help keep wildlife out.”

John Ogburn is a design consultant with Overstream and was the project manager for the Flemming’s project. “It’s fairly typical that we start our involvement with the homeowner either just before or just after the foundation is set, as was the case with the Flemmings,” Ogburn said. “From the time we broke ground until project completion the project was about four months in construction.”



Ogburn emphasized that the key engineering challenge to overcome with the sloping lot was raising the level of the backyard and the specific outdoor living area all the way up to the level of the house. “This project required more than 200 truckloads of special fill dirt or over 3,000 tons,” said Ogburn. “In this regard the project was definitely unusual. Typically we will have to build up the pool area in order to excavate around it and in this case it was the opposite approach.”

Cohesion of landscape and hardscape

What was particularly helpful for the Flemmings in their decision making was the three-dimensional computer-aided design drawings that gave a life-like view from every possible angle of the project.

“The drawings really allowed us to visualize exactly what it would look like,” said Shawn. “It was essential for us to have cohesion between the hardscape, landscape and design of the outdoor living space to reflect what we’d accomplished with the home.”

The result is the Flemmings’ dream house and backyard living space that was ready for them from the first day of move-in this past spring. Extra features such as the oversized lava rock-lined fire bowls flanking the pool provide great ambience and added warmth on cool evenings. There’s also the flowing infinity pool that eliminates the need for a pool skimmer because the waterfall effect off the back of the pool takes floating debris right along with the water to the filter.

“It is hard to imagine this space, considering what we had initially,” said Karin. “We just love it.”



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