

IMBY: Atlanta entrepreneur says 'put it in my backyard'

By DENNIS CARBONI

What do you have in your front yard? A few maples, perhaps a birch, some yews or rhododendrons, and if you're ambitious, a bed of impatiens.

What does Larry Dean have? An 18-hole golf course.

Larry Dean is a successful Atlanta entrepreneur who, in 1971 founded SSI, a nationally known software company.

A number of years ago he and his family decided to build a magnificently extravagant 58-acre estate 20 miles north of Atlanta on the Chattahoochee River. Dean Gardens was built as a home for his family in the hopes that, in the future, it will become an attraction not unlike the great mansions of Newport, R.I.

As explained in *Dean Gardens, Legacy of Vision*, a book about the estate, "It is a work of art designed to benefit the community, the arts, and humankind forever after."

The golf course covers approximately 25 acres of rolling terrain (the front yard) at Dean Gardens. How were 18 holes fit onto 25 acres?

Essentially, all the fair-ways occupy the same barbell-shaped grass area. The five greens are nestled into the site's nooks and crannies. Eight tees are located near the greens, and two more are positioned at the center of the site along the entrance road.

Can playing the same tees and greens become monotonous?

"Never," said Dean. "You tee off from the same spots, but you go to different greens."

Conversely, when playing from different tees toward the same green, "You don't think about the fact that you've played this green... from another direction," he explained.

The course, as well as the entire landscape of Dean Gardens, was designed by Joe Gayle of Atlanta-based Joe Gayle & Associates. Gayle has spent 30 years practicing garden design with his degree in ornamental horticulture from the University of Georgia.

He has designed landscapes for Bruno Foods, Chateau Elan Winery, numerous large estates, and the Athens estate of Kenny Rogers, where he designed the first of these mini 18-hole courses.

He described his aim as a designer: to create "habitats for people and

wildlife." Without any previous experience with golf courses, he brought in consultants when designing the course for Rogers. He told how Fazio Golf Course Designers came to check whether any sacred design rules were being violated. They left impressed. Gayle is very confident when sculpturing the ground, and this shows in his work. His theme for his courses is "Golf in a garden."

"The hardest part was to design it so it did not detract from the [experience of the] gardens," he explained, adding that golf should be fun, a retreat. The course should also be pretty, so that golfers appreciate the landscape and take more time to play, he said.

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During two weeks in 1991, the golf course concept evolved from Dean's original idea — a three-hole course: two par-3s and a par-4 — into Gayle's 18-hole scheme. The construction covered nine months from spring to fall in 1991. Because the landscape contained few trees in the "front yard" (a former pasture), no large-scale clearing was done.

Said Dean: "The only thing that was actually... changed was tee F: We added that little cul-de-sac in the woods. But basically everything else just needed to be graded."

During construction of Dean Gardens, all the designers would meet, along with the family, every Thursday at 4 p.m. for consultation. Tee F was added during one of these meetings.

Trees were added along the east and west borders (the road runs along the north edge of the property) to give the neighbors a buffer. Tons of rocks from Tennessee were shipped to the Georgia site. Three lagoons, five sand bunkers, and one grass bunker were created.

Thirty hours per week are needed for two full-time and two part-time crew members to maintain the course, which has Bermudagrass 419 in the fairway areas and Penncross creeping bentgrass on the greens and tees.

The crew, under manager Tim Culp, keeps a fair amount of equipment for such a limited area — a Toro 450-D fairway mower, two Toro riding greens/tees mowers, two John Deere walk-behind greens mowers, and a Toro 3100 Rangemaster. Dean likes to operate himself. "I'd rather get out and cut the grass [than play golf]," he said. "I've got a big Toro mower that cuts about a 12-foot swath."

If he's not cutting, he's playing the course, shooting in the low 90s. However, with a local rule — "Larryball,"



The landscaping stands out on Larry Dean's "backyard" golf course.

allowing a second chance on every shot — he's posted a 66 at Dean Gardens. Eight people (two foursomes) can play comfortably; 12 is possible (he has six carts) with a traffic cop and hard hats. But four is the usual number.

Dean has hosted charity events with celebrities. "It's a wonderful course to have any kind of skins game or shoot-out, because everybody stands in one

spot and [watches] four holes. It's a great crowd participation thing. I don't know of any [other] golf course where you can do that."

When asked how the course feels to play, Larry Dean replied emphatically, "It's wonderful! For me it has certainly enhanced the landscape of the property, which was always designed to be a garden anyway."

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