

Collaborative effort

Tossing out the plans and designing a residential water feature as you go can spell disaster — or something incredible

BY DON DALE

When you put a creative contractor together with an equally adventurous client, unexpected things can happen. Sometimes you have to trust your ingenuity, tap into your client's enthusiasm and let 'er rip, says contractor Mike Bulone.

Maybe this is one of those "don't try

this at home," projects, but Bulone, owner of Bulone Brothers Landscaping, Aurora, OH, made it happen. He "teamed" with a client to create what an incredible backyard waterscape project. In other words, Bulone and the client agreed to pretty much scrap the original blueprints and the original contract — and "wing it" in the midst of a very complex job.

Not a good idea? Recipe for disaster?

From time to time, given the right circumstances, why not throw caution to the wind and test yourself, asks Bulone? He started his design/build company in 1992, and since he's experienced in creating water features and loves the ingenuity they require, he was confident his company and the client could pull it off

— he just didn't know how.

The customers found Bulone through a local pond and garden tour after admiring the water feature he saw at the contractor's house. That led to some work, such as renovating an existing pond in the client's front yard. But the big job was to be a water feature in the backyard.

Leaving the known behind

That job ultimately encompassed the entire backyard and took up about five months of Bulone's time over a period of almost a year. Taking the client's original ideas, Bulone came up with some of his own. This led to a collaborative effort that was so creative that it necessitated leaving the original design and working from day to day on elements that client and contractor collaborated on.

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◀ The bridge, concrete with a stone veneer, is based on a bridge in a Thomas Kincade print.

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"There was a lot of creativity there. It was above and beyond the normal," Bulone says. He loved the process, and the client got into the spirit of the project.

By the end of the job, the back yard

▼ Grade changes challenged Bulone's crew in building the patio and water features.



held a stream, a bridge, an extensive patio, a lot of new vegetation and a waterfall as well as several small water grade changes ending in a pondless reservoir. It was a water feature that grew, in phases, into an entire landscape.

The job began in the fall of 2005 with the grading of the odd, triangular backyard. The first part of the work was a walkway and multi-tiered patio. Next came a 6-ft.-long footbridge, which Bulone conceived as being stone. It ended up being built in three phases in concrete, and then his crew put a stone veneer on it. The bridge was based on the client's concept of a Thomas Kinkade painting that had a bridge in it.

"Then we started carving out our stream bed," Bulone says. It ran under the bridge, dropping three levels, and ended



in a huge hole filled with gravel. That was the pondless water holding tank, the size calculated after figuring grade requirements and the fact that the recirculating system would require 17,000 gallons of water per hour.

Using mostly Aquascapes circulation equipment, the water system began with a hidden biofalls box from which water overflowed into the head of the stream among some evergreen trees. At the bottom, water was recirculated through a pump and filtration in a vault hidden in the holding pond. Three pumps were used in all. There is a 4-ft.-tall waterfall by the bridge that streams into the holding tank and is viewable from the house.

Another prominent aspect was the stones and boulders. Bulone was almost fanatical in selecting colored "character stones". He and his crew fitted about 50 tons of stone into the landscape, including many moss stones and one 700-lb. boulder that he drilled through with a diamond bit so that stream water could run through it. Reworked drainage and a planting of Canadian hemlock trees for backyard privacy were also necessary.

Excellence recognized

The yard turned out to be beautiful, and it won the 2006 Water Features & Lighting Award (Category II, over \$25,000) from the Ohio Landscape Association. But a beautiful part of the story is how well this turned out with both client and builder tossing out ideas over the course



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◀ Bulone took care in selecting the boulders and "character stones" that would grace the flowing stream and 4-ft.-tall waterfall. Everything is viewable from the client's house

design, they also agreed to set aside the original estimate and contract. Because the project grew and grew, the company basically ended up working on a per-day rate that was acceptable to both parties.

"The homeowner's very happy," Bu-

lone adds. "That's what it all comes down to." **LM**

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of the project. Bulone is still amazed by the customers' active participation.

"We wanted to make sure we were on the same page," he points out, so good communication was important. Fortunately, the homeowner was around a lot, and Bulone was on the job most of the time himself. "A lot of it, we winged it," he recalls, and made corrections to the corrections as they went along.

For anyone who knows Bulone, that doesn't come as a surprise. He's a creative contractor who loves to tweak and redesign and reassemble as he progresses. When you're working in concrete and stone, that can be a hassle, but he's just the type of guy who will tear out work if the aesthetics aren't there for him. His crew of seven to 10 workers (it varies with the season) has learned to be patient with him. "First of all, they know I'm crazy," jokes Bulone.

As for this particular client, he calls him a "needle-in-a-haystack kind of customer." He says that their relationship was so successful that early in the game the two of them not only began changing the

▼ The 6-ft.-long concrete bridge was built in phases and is a focal point of the landscape.



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