



ROCK REVIVAL

Creative Waters' James McPhail rescues a back yard from a subpar water feature and turns it once again into a thing of beauty.

BY SOL LIEBERMAN

GORDON HANKS' BACKYARD water feature was like a stubborn black fly on a birthday cake. The mess of cracked concrete and outdated stones on the hillside didn't fit with Hanks' masterful garden (right), which included a Japanese maple, a memorial rose garden and meticulous formal planting that left not a pruning or placement to whimsy. Hanks — a self-proclaimed perfectionist — retired in May, which gave him more time to edge and deadhead while sneering at the stone albatross.

And it wasn't just aesthetics that sowed discontent. The water feature leaked, too. The pond wouldn't stay full, and Hanks' groomed French drains weren't doing enough to prevent parts of his lawn, which were attracting mosquitoes, from drowning.

"Ecologically, it wasn't very sound," said Hanks of the 15-year-old feature — which cost \$10,000, not including money spent in upkeep. It had to go.



So early last summer, Hanks called James "Jimmy Mac" McPhail, owner and operator of Creative Waters of Draper, UT, for a water feature redo at his 1.3-acre property in Little Cottonwood Creek Valley, a picturesque Salt Lake City community nestled among the Wasatch Mountains. McPhail, who was cruising through his 20th season of installing features ranging from \$5,000 for a simple waterfall to \$300,000 for a grand commercial feature, was glad to take the Hanks job. After an assessment of the 85-by-65-ft. area, Hanks and McPhail came to terms on the project. And after \$112,000, six weeks and 1,000 hours of labor, Hanks had a new feature that more than met with his approval.

A job well done

Other than a few days battling the elements, the project went off without a hitch for McPhail's 4-person crew.

"It's absolutely beautiful," says Hanks. "It looks like it has been here forever."

McPhail installed two Tuscan waterfalls on the hillside, cascading a casual 55 ft. until coming together for the final 30

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Top. The Creative Waters crew starts the project with careful excavation.

Right. Each rock was hand-placed to avoid tearing the liner. **Left.** The rock staircase was built with spaces for the client to customize with his own plantings.

ft. toward the lower lake, which is large and hourglass-shaped. The upper ponds — 9 in. deep — do a nice job reflecting the nearby ponderosa pines. A walkway flanks the lake, and a cantilevered rock stretches out from the walkway so Hanks' grandchildren can reach out and touch the waterfall.

Big boulders and cleverly placed small stones are peppered throughout, and a 4-ft., powdercoated Tuscan iron arched bridge is the finishing touch.

McPhail is good at his job. At 6 ft. 5 in. and 250 lbs., he looks the part of a rock mover, too. But McPhail is more of a "rock whisperer" — a careful artist who shapes stubborn tonnage into stone sensations.

Much of his artistry is instinctual. When he and Hanks met to discuss the project for the first time, Hanks said to McPhail, "Give me an idea of what you're going to do." McPhail responded, "I really can't. To give a specific drawing is impossible." This freethinking process allows McPhail to adjust on the fly if he sees something he doesn't like, and it has helped him to build a healthy business.

Quality first

McPhail's business is also helped by other contractors. Because there is no license for water feature installation, many clients get stuck with shoddy work that would never pass muster for a Creative Waters job. "At least 35% of my work is tear-out and reduce," he says.

McPhail says some landscapers use quick fixes, like a track hoe with a thumb to pick up rocks and drop them down on

the liner, which pinches and often tears it so owners have to refill the water constantly. To him, this is a cardinal sin.

"Water feature 101: Don't drop the rock," says McPhail, who hand-places his stones from a strap to avoid punctures and leakage. Done his way, he says, water loss is limited to evaporation — which amounts to 0.25 in. per day at the most, plus ancillary splash.

But to McPhail, it's more than just about laying stones. It's a step-by-step process in which you must be willing to pivot and deviate from your original plan. And it all starts with the prep excavation.

"It looks like something you'd find in Egypt. The earth is staircased out," he says of the beginning stages of a water feature. Once the fall section is planned, he often coats the floors with sand to cover any sharp protrusions. Then it's on to the liners — three layers that also act as corrosive barriers and protect against ground squirrels and mice that may try to nest.

First, he lays an 8-oz. geotextile fabric, followed by a 45-mm rubber liner, and then a second layer of geotextile. Then he gets to setting the stones.

"Twist 'em, turn 'em, rotate 'em, chisel 'em," McPhail says. He points out that he used surface stone like quartz and hardened sandstone of different colors — never limestone — on the Hanks feature. He also left planting spaces, so Hanks could personalize his new feature after all the "heavy lifting" was done.

Now that Hanks has a backyard water feature that complements his world-class garden, he can settle in to sculpt and prune in peace. If tweaks are needed, McPhail will be willing, but surprised. Unless it's for coffee, McPhail says clients rarely call and ask, "When are you coming back?" **LM**

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