



A PACIFIC NORTHWEST
PATIO TAKES ITS CUES

from Rome

By Katherine Malmo

Joe and Christine Johnston had just returned from Rome when they contacted Drake's 7 Dees about creating their dream backyard. While traveling in the Eternal City, the couple had discovered a tiny restaurant tucked into a back alley. They found themselves returning several times and lingering there long into the night. The Johnstons wanted to create a similar space outside their Portland home.

"In Italy the restaurants had quaint settings with backyard gardens, gazebos, lighting and water features," Joe says. "Then when we got back home, we realized our backyard was such a drag. We decided to make it like another room of the house that we could enjoy six to eight months of the year."

Chris Dara, a senior designer for building and design at Drake's 7 Dees, brought his architecture background and experience creating outdoor spaces to his meeting with the Johnstons and their planning sessions.

However, before they could create their outdoor oasis, Dara and his team had some obstacles to overcome. The Johnstons' home was flanked by an oddly shaped backyard located at the end of a cul-de-sac. It was also located next to a high school and often noisy with buses, baseball games and kids. The ground was not ideal either – it was muddy, the soil acidic.

Working within these constraints, Dara created a functional plan that the Johnstons required, and with space for lush plants like the foliage Christine had admired in Italy.

Before construction began, the Drake's 7 Dees team amended the soil, adding mason sand to help drainage. Then they layered on 2-foot by 2-foot pavers with clean lines, reminiscent of a cobblestone but with a more modern feel. The pavers set



Chris Dara



up a grid-like pattern, which shifts and creates a path that ties the backyard into a cohesive space, from the patio and dining area to the fire pit near the back fence.

“I love the fire pit on a cold night,” Joe says. “It’s a hoot to go out there and have fun. All our neighbors want to come over, and we’re having neighborhood parties now.”

The back of the fire pit is bordered by clear cedar beams that lead up to a curved trellis. The star jasmine planted at the base of the posts will climb the trellis to create a look reminiscent of Italy’s wisteria-covered pergolas.

“It’s got this natural feel to it,” Dara says. “When the jasmine claims it in a couple of years, it’s going to be pretty cool.”

Dara rounded out the project with a water feature to create a relaxing atmosphere even when events at the high school are in full swing. They chose a system with a boulder that sits on the top of a steel drum echo chamber. When the water hits the drum, it amplifies the sound. A valve allows the homeowners to

adjust the sound depending on the level of neighborhood noise.

The crew finished the project by adding lush yet practical plants to soften the edges of the hardscape.

“When I think of Rome,” Dara says, “I think of pergolas and lighting for defining spaces; I think of filtration of light from above, decomposed granite and timeless materials. When they said ‘Rome’ to me, it felt more like the ambience and the experience.”

The Johnstons were so thrilled with the project and their new backyard that they nicknamed Ivan Garcia, the foreman of the Drake’s 7 Dees landscape team, Michelangelo for his workmanship and artistic touch.

“I love the whole thing,” Joe says. “I can sit at the patio table with a glass of wine and plate of cheese, and no matter where I turn my head, there’s something beautiful to look at or hear, or I can close my eyes and feel like I’m in Italy. Chris and his team really did a wonderful job fulfilling our vision.” 🏠