



LEFT: In this view from halfway down their hillside, five terraces, each about seventy-five feet long, stabilize the riverbank and help with erosion control. Terraces extend about three stories down the riverbank and are made of railroad ties that are held in place with steel pipes. Terrace beds grow hardy low-maintenance plants. They also wanted terrace plants for visual appeal; plants with variable heights, shapes, and colors throughout the seasons. **RIGHT:** From the deck chair, in view of Dennis's fire table that he dreamed and designed and built, perhaps new dreams are spun.



PHOTOS BY BRENDA K. JOHNSON

Plant Exchange

Keeping The Dream Alive

After 10 Years, Yankton Man Continues Work On Retirement Home

Share tips from your plant experience, give us a tour of your plant site, or send your questions related to outdoor or indoor plants to news@yankton.net Attn: Brenda Johnson or write to P&D, 319 Walnut St, Yankton, SD 57078, Attn: Brenda Johnson.

BY BRENDA K. JOHNSON
P&D Correspondent

Q: When you live in one place all your life, have most of your dreams been realized?

A: Dennis Menke, with his wife Ann, are owners of Boston Shoes To Boots on Third Street in Yankton. "I have worked there on and off for 53 years," Dennis says. "I started shining shoes when I was ten years old and I'm still shining shoes. Ann and I work there together and come home and work together."

When this cobbler walks home from work, he channels some of his dreams into his latest landscaping projects. Just completed, he designed and built a custom granite base fire table complete with a copper lid.

"The natural gas flames of the fire pit emerge through royal blue glass rocks that sparkle with light and flame," he says.

When not in use as a fire pit, the copper lid serves as a conversation table by their hot tub. This private outdoor space with a panoramic view off a tall bluff of the Missouri River is his house's horizontal backyard. His vertical backyard ends stories below at the river.

HOW IT STARTED

"When you come onto the property a hundred years after (the house) was built and 20 years since it had been renovated, it takes some thought, how you'd like it to look," Dennis says. "We moved here in 2002. It's our retirement house if I can keep working on it. He refers to the house and yard as a "fixer upper."

"I lived in Yankton all my life. I wanted to live by the river," Menke says. He likes walking down to the dock and heading up the river for lunch. Problem is, few homes in town by the river are available for purchase.

"You don't get much choice because you have to wait for someone to pass away or move." He says that he was lucky to acquire his home when someone wanted to sell it.

Several landscaping challenges confront him, but issues dealing with riverbank erosion are fundamental. "Mostly, the backyard is a hillside. When we moved here, the backyard was overgrown in weeds. Lots of hemp marijuana." In fact, their backyard / riverbank / hillside descends more than seven stories down to the river. There are natural horizontal pathways about half way down and along the shore.

When Dennis works on a landscaping project, he first researches an idea. "Then I work with my hands and back. Ann says I can see a project. It is in my head and then I put it on paper. I usually think about the idea for almost a year before putting it into action. When you do big projects you don't want to be wrong."

STABILITY AND LANDSCAPE

Menke says that he wanted a native look to the hillside and he didn't want the bank stabilizer structure of steel trusses to stand out. The upper half of the riverbank especially needed attention. "Since the house is close to the edge of the riverbank, I chose railroad ties, held in place with steel pipe to create terraces." He chose Brian Noecker of Premier Landscaping in Hartington Nebraska for this work. "Brian and his crew and I worked for six weeks to create the terraces and stabilize the bank. The area is about 35 feet high and about 75 feet across. I think we ended up with a million pounds of force against the bank."

Five terraces, each about 75 feet long are spaced evenly apart on the upper half of riverbank. Each terrace has horizontal surface about four feet wide, in order to safely plant and tend shrubs and small trees. The angle of drop of the riverbank, though quite steep, still allows one to see all the terrace beds from the deck of their home. From river's edge, his home and five terraces with plantings are quite distinctive.

"It took about six dump truck loads of soil and two of rock for the terraces and about 200 railroad ties," he said.

Menke wants plants for the terrace beds that require little continuing maintenance, have low water requirements, contribute deep roots for erosion control. He wants plant that can tolerate the winds, the heat of southern exposure, and the freeze-thaw issues of early spring in this hillside microclimate. Also he wants plants that grow predictably within their space, have distinct and contrasting shapes, and among them,

add variety of color in all seasons. He works with Diane Dickes of Diane's Greenhouse of Fordyce, Nebraska to select the plants that fit their requirements. The plants have completed their second growing season.

They are pleased with the Emerald arborvitae, Goldeneye cut-leaf sumac, spirea, Arctic and Dappled willow, burning bush, ninebark, Huron dogwoods, spreading yews, and gold and red barberries that are growing on the terraces. "We are thinking of adding more arborvitae or topiaries that are a bit more formal on both sides of the stairs," he says.

Access to the terraces is simpler now that a stairway from midway down the riverbank to the deck is complete. When Menke walks on the terraces to tend the plants, he says that he reminds himself to lean toward the bank.

Watering the plants consists of literally dropping a hose down to the terrace bed. Compared to working on sharp angle hillside to build the terraces, plant maintenance is much easier. He expects the installed plants to require little extra work. Besides, Menke attributes his ability to climb tall stairs without being winded to his labor on this hillside.

"Woodchucks like to dig holes," he says. On the terraces, that creates erosion problems. They solved this problem with sun-proof Dacron erosion-control fabric that they found in Omaha. Terrace beds are now covered with the fabric. "It's almost a half-inch thick, so it keeps woodchucks, raccoons, and turkeys from digging. You secure it with landscape staples."

HILLSIDE BELAY

You might think that with terraces established on their upper riverbank that Menkes are due a few rewards from their dreaming and hard work. However, the lower riverbank is also about 35 feet or about three stories high, and is also about 75 feet across, and additionally requires erosion control. The angle of drop on this portion of bank is about 45 degrees.

Menke's requirements for what they planted in this lower riverbank

are clear. "The plants needed to stabilize the hillside with their roots, have low water needs, and be short enough to not block the view of the upper hillside from the deck above or down at the riverbank."

He settled on a hybrid mixture of creeping and short fescue with deep roots for the hillside. Then they planted. "We raked to clear the area, then hand planted the seeds and patted them in, and put straw on top. The first time we didn't put straw on and it rained and washed it all away. We re-seeded again and used netting with the straw. By then we had both

rolled down the hill more than once."

Neither Menke has broken bones from landscaping, but safety is an issue that needs solution. "We started using ground anchors and straps to belay our way down the hill," Menke says.

After the second seeding, they over-seeded in the fall and the grass has established as they hoped. Native staghorn sumac and chokeberry shrubs also grow on the lower hillside.

ONWARD AND ONWARD

"It's a lot of fun to live along the river. I put way more (sweat equity) into this than I thought I would put into a house," Menke says. "This year we may finish up. What we had hoped to be a five-year project turned out to be ten. We've had a couple of setbacks. This year we built the decks."

We stand on one of the two decks of his retirement home and can clearly see to the Nebraska side of the river.

"In my mind, here on the upper deck, this is the bow of my steamship-my paddle wheeler," Menke says. He points to the brown-grained PVC material used for the lower-care deck. "We plan to decorate this deck like a steamship with deck chairs we can secure when the wind blows. White rail and six foot sections of glass (let) you see easily thru the safety railing."

"From this (upper) deck you are about eight stories above the river," he says. When you look down, you see each of the five terraces below

with their plantings and the arborvitae forming a "V" pattern down the hill. Mature cottonwood trees frame the boundaries of the lot.

"This project has been very labor intensive, but once it's done, it should be low maintenance," he says. Some of their efforts with ground anchors and straps bring to mind extreme sport reality shows.

"I do meditate on this project," he says. "If I can't do it myself, I talk to a craftsman who can make my dreams come true. I know a lot of craftsmen because they wear work shoes. We talk or we see each other at a ball game. It's the thing about Yankton that is so wonderful. You can know a lot of craft people. It makes it easy to be creative in a little town. I don't have the skill set to do some of the work."

He refers to his custom fire pit project regarding help from other locals with talents. "Scott Luken cut the white granite top and made the granite base. Bow Creek Metal crafted the custom stainless steel fire pan. Dakota sheet metal fabricated the top and light reflector inside the glass blocks."

Another completed project is matching landscape block pillars by their front entrance. Similar pillars at the garage add unity of repeating stonework texture and color to their front for curb appeal. These pillars hold Ann's plant containers.

Pillars near the front entrance have cast concrete caps and rest on glass blocks, which reflect low voltage lighting inside the pillars. "It took a couple of months to do the pillars, working weekends," he says. Concrete caps match the shape of the house roof. Glass brick and granite art objects among Ann's flowers in front are also used in the fire pit. Other projects await.

"For a little lot with a small backyard, we try to pack a lot visual appeal into it—trying to be low maintenance once complete," Menke says.

POSTSCRIPT: By fall, drought has challenged Menkes and other gardeners. "Hard to water on the hill," Dennis says. "I spent three or four hours of hand watering a week. Next season I'm putting in a Rainbird Dripline irrigation system. Lost yellow columnar barberries and replaced them with spreading junipers." With new flights of stairs down to the river, Dennis enjoys the low voltage lighting as he walks. "Light points down so it doesn't obscure night vision," he says.



PHOTO BY BRENDA K. JOHNSON

Bark pattern is a feature of the Northern Catalpa tree along with spring flowers and large deciduous leaves. A collection of trees in the Yankton Arboretum line the walking trail behind the Summit Center for public enjoyment.

Q: How did the Yankton Arboretum trees fare with drought?

A: Yankton Arboretum is located behind the Summit Center and Yankton High School. Public access to the collection of labeled trees is along the public bike trail. Lisa Kortan, Urban Forester for the City of Yankton, supervises the care of the arboretum trees for public interest. Newer plantings required twenty to thirty gallons of water per week during the heat of summer.

"Deer pressure was great on the trees last winter," Kortan said. "Some of the trees planted there were borderline for the zone, and some USDA Zone 5 trees were lost. I planted seven new varieties there, including Armstrong Maple, Hotwings Maple, Corzan Linden, Redleaf Mayday Tree, Matador Maple, Quaking Aspen and Royal Red Maple." The trees display their barks for winter interest, variety in leaves and flowers, and fall color. The public can see how these varieties grow and thrive in an open setting environment.

Kortan mentioned that last year that her son collected leaves from the Yankton Arboretum for a class project. This year, with the drought, her daughter did the same for her assignment.

"Leaves were from the same trees," Kortan said. "My daughter said 'Why is my catalpa leaf so small and my brother's was so big?' She thought I had cheated her! Maple and mulberry leaves were also smaller than in her brother's collection. I guess that the crop of tree leaves varies just as the farmer's crop with drought. The number and size of these arboretum leaves were smaller."

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December Plant Tips

Jay Gurney, owner and nurseryman at Yankton Nurseries, LLC at 2000 Ferdig Ave. produces poinsettias here in Yankton. He's heard stories of putting poinsettias in closets to turn them red. "Nothing goes in a closet but

coats," he said. He shares some other considerations if you want your poinsettia to last until Christmas.

- Consider selecting a poinsettia about this time so it will remain attractive through the holiday.
- Find plants that also have green leaves and tiny disk flowers blooming for lasting quality.
- Set poinsettias where there

is as much light as you have, in about 65-70 degrees F., but away from heat vents.

- Check plant soil to see if it needs water. Goal is moist soil. Take pot out of the foil. Water soil and then drain. Wet roots or dry roots cause plants to wilt.
- As lower green leaves turn yellow, remove them. It's natural, much like leaves turning in fall.