

TREES AND LUSH  
GREENERY CREATE  
A WELCOMING  
SENSE OF SERENITY  
IN A SOUTH OF  
GRAND GARDEN.

# GREENPEACE

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PHOTOS BY BEN EASTER



"The universe will give you treasures if you are open to the opportunities," says Rita Perea, who cherishes a beautiful specimen of cucumber tree magnolia (*pictured above*) along with the hundreds of other plants in her garden.



THE PERCUSSIVE DIN OF CICADAS RAINS FROM THE CANOPIES IN RITA AND ERNIE PEREA'S GARDEN SOUTH OF GRAND AVENUE, A CADENCE AUDIBLE FOR A FEW WEEKS ONLY EVERY 17 YEARS.

"Well, they are majestic," says Rita Perea, walking toward me, hand pointed upward, the trees and the cicadas both the objects of her gesture. She's fond of their rain stick-like rattling, even as they've taken up a brief residence among the hostas in her front yard.

Indeed, the cicadas are hardly annoying here; rather, they help foster a Zen-like calm that seems almost eerily intentional. That's not surprising: Over the past eight years, Perea, founder of the International Contemplative Gardening Association, has purposefully created a

tranquil respite for relaxation and reflection. Architected with thought and purpose, her style is intentionally meditative, from the fountains and spiritual icons to the color conversations between plants in vignettes throughout the garden to a small greenhouse, which she uses as a wintertime escape.

"Everything has a story," says Perea, motioning to the garden laid before us as we settle into two matching green chairs. "I want the garden to exude love."

Love was lacking when Rita and husband Ernie, a local physician, first viewed their future home in February 2005. "We lived in Ankeny at the time after having lived around the state, but we knew we wanted to live South of Grand," Perea says. The neighborhood's access to city life motivated their search, but the midcentury house,

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Rita Perea believes tasteful and inspirational icons are an important part of a garden. "I don't want to have the kind of garden that would intimidate people," she says. "I'm an educator at heart. I want things to look really good, be meaningful and spiritual, but also be simple."



Purple is Ernie Perea's favorite color. Practically poetic, these flower-loaded stems of clustered bellflower yaw with the breeze. Rita Perea advises growing plants that bring you joy. "For me, they are like little treasures that come back," she says. "I like perennials and no fuss. Fussiness would distract from the contemplative nature of the garden."



Perea imported her greenhouse as a kit from a company in Belgium. Friends helped her erect the frame and build the foundation, and she added pavers and brick chips for the flooring. "I enjoy coffee in there on winter mornings," Perea says. "In the fall, I don't cut anything down around it. It gives me something to look at and remember when I sit in there."



PEREA  
GARDENS  
BY A  
BUDDHIST  
IDIOM:  
CHOP  
WOOD,  
CARRY  
WATER.





Left: A garden created for reflection and meditation typically offers ample opportunities to sit. Perea prefers two seats, inviting clients and friends to join her in the garden for conversation and spiritual direction. A bowl of water for soothing sound never hurts, either. “Whatever your beliefs or style, a crucial element is to set aside a space for you to reconnect with yourself,” Perea says. “That’s the essence of a contemplative garden.”





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Rita and Ernie Perea in their garden.

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though not what they originally sought, sealed the deal. “When I walked in, I got this overwhelming feeling that we were supposed to be here, to help the home heal,” Perea says.

The yard, hardly a garden then, needed similar bedside manner. Perea grimaces with the memory of disappointment. “There was mint everywhere,” she says. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, there isn’t any mint here today.) A lonely picket fence marked the southwest corner of the lot, complete with homespun graffiti that read, “Fences make good neighbors,” not exactly an expression that appealed to Perea’s sense of mind.

Beyond these few scars, the lot essentially was a blank slate. “When I looked out the kitchen window, I didn’t like what I saw. It felt very chaotic,” she recalls. There was a magnolia just north of the garage, though at the time, Perea didn’t know its name. The words “cucumber tree magnolia” didn’t enter her lexicon until 2011, when she enrolled in the Master Gardener program. “But I liked it, so it stayed,” she says. “I had a deep appreciation for the tree.”

Gardens are expressions of their creators, and as she planted her rhapsody in green, her spot of ground grew to reflect her keen interest in world religions and spiritual practices. “I became very interested in meditative traditions,” says Perea, a former school administrator turned professional leadership consultant and executive coach. A certified spiritual director, she also has a Ph.D. in transpersonal psychology with an emphasis on organizational psychology.

“I had been a yoga practitioner since I was 13,” she adds. “Meditation became very important to me.”

Her awareness of mindful living translated into a deliberate pursuit of plants like 70 Sweet Kate spiderworts and 55 hellebores, the winter-blooming perennials she counts as her favorites. “I don’t just see green,” Perea says. “I see the plant colors dancing with each other.”

Today, gardening is a family affair, reinforcing the interpersonal bonds in her life. “Ernie has really enjoyed gardening,” she says. “He’s out here with me every weekend.” Her son, Scott, also became interested in the garden’s evolution. “We attended Master Gardener classes together, and now he’s a certified arborist,” Perea says.

“The gardens almost force me to be mindful, to do the tasks that need to be done,” says Perea, studying the muscular trunk of an aging black walnut. She pauses, looking off in the direction of the magnolia. “I would say that gardening for me is a spiritual practice,” she says. “I would absolutely say that.” ■

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