

# Tranquility Garden Offers Outdoor Respite for Elderly Catholic Sisters



The McAuley Convent in Merion Station, Penn., envisioned a garden space for the 48 Sisters of Mercy in their care, many of whom are in various stages of dementia. Landscape architect Jack Carman, FASLA, of Design for Generations, LLC, designed the 9,000 sq. ft. Tranquility Garden with a porous walkway, rolling planters, ornamental trees, perennials, grasses, a circular walkway and patio seating.

PHOTO: JACK CARMAN, FASLA, RLA

by David Aquilina, Strategic Storyteller

*“Research confirms what we know from experience. Spending time outdoors, getting fresh air, and enjoying natural beauty improve health and enhance quality of life.”*

*Roxann Bambach, Administrator  
McAuley Convent (Merion Station, Penn.)*

For the elderly with memory loss, important benefits include decreased agitation and anxiety, better quality of sleep, and opportunities for social interaction, exercise and experiences that engage the senses.

This understanding inspired Bambach and her colleagues at the McAuley Convent to envision the transformation of an ordinary turfgrass landscape into the Tranquility Garden. It is a safe and beautiful landscape for Sisters of Mercy residing or recovering at this retirement community. Jack Carman, FASLA, RLA, Design for Generations, LLC (Medford,

N.J.), a landscape architect who specializes in creating therapeutic outdoor environments that encourage people to experience nature, designed the garden.

The Tranquility Garden includes a circular walkway and patio seating areas paved with a permeable paving material. The design features eight different varieties of ornamental trees and 16 different types of shrubs. The planting beds feature 28 perennials and three types of ornamental grasses.

Carman was guided by a basic set of design principles for gardens intended for the elderly with dementia:

**Safety and Security** – First and foremost, minimize potential hazards. Steps and changes in elevation are avoided because of the risk of trips and falls. Surfaces are non-slip and non-reflective. Enclosing the garden with a high fence ensures that no one can wander away



Above: Carman specified non-toxic plants without thorns, sturdy and stable outdoor furniture for both individuals and groups, fountains and wind chimes to engage the senses, and a circular, easy-to-navigate walkway. PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER KENDZIERSKI

Top, Right: Local ordinances required all surfaces to be pervious, and no increase in stormwater runoff. To meet these requirements, Carman specified Porous Pave XL, a pour-in-place paving material made from recycled rubber and kiln-dried aggregate mixed with a liquid binder. The ADA compliant path, which totals 3,000 square feet, has a slope between 1.5 and 2.0 percent, gradually sloping away from the building to a pre-existing swale. PHOTO: JACK CARMAN, FASLA, RLA

Bottom, Right: For safety and security, gardens for older people with dementia must be enclosed. Since the McAuley Convent shares a campus with two schools, the Merion-Mercy Academy and Waldron Mercy Academy, the fence keeps the Sisters safe from cars and buses that use the parking lot. The garden is safely enclosed without feeling closed off. PHOTO: JACK CARMAN, FASLA, RLA

from the safety of the garden. No sharp, thorny or poisonous plants are present.

Design for Multiple Activities – “We designed for a variety of activities, including quiet contemplation and prayer, walking, gardening, outdoor classes, socializing, and dining,” said Carman. Outdoor furniture, with seating for individuals and groups, is sited in areas of sun and shade, and the tables feature umbrellas. The raised rolling planters enable the sisters to enjoy gardening while staying seated. Staff can easily roll the planters aside when space is needed for activities such as outdoor chair aerobics.

Engaging Features – Gardens for people with memory loss have elements that draw attention and engage the senses. Carman included two fountains and wind chimes. Plant selection emphasizes color and strong scents (such as fragrant viburnum shrubs and perennials including fragrant

angel cornflower and English lavender).

Viewable from Indoors – There are times even on sunny, warm days when some may prefer to stay indoors. When they do not want go outside, the Sisters can still enjoy viewing the garden from the windows of their rooms as well as through the large glass doors that lead out to the garden from the activity room.

Garden Walk – The circular walkway is easy to navigate. It is wide to accommodate wheelchairs, single walkers and those strolling side by side. The walkway and seating areas have a non-slip surface. For the Tranquility Garden, it also had to be permeable.

Local government approval of the project required no impervious surfaces or increase in stormwater runoff. To include a walkway and patio seating areas, Carman had to use a permeable paving material.

He selected Porous Pave XL from



The garden is viewable from indoors, and the staff can easily roll the planters aside when space is needed for other activities, such as outdoor chair aerobics. The outdoor furniture, made from 94 percent recycled content (plastic milk jugs), is sturdy and stable, with rounded edges.

PHOTO: JACK CARMAN, FASLA, RLA

Brian Geesey, Rock & Block Design (Reading, Penn.) poured two inches of the paving material on a base of compacted ¾-aggregate installed by Eric’s Nursery and Garden Center (Mt. Laurel, N.J.). The project was completed in July 2017.

“We have worked with it on other projects,” said Bryan Geesey, owner, Rock & Block Designs. “It gives you a uniform, level and seamless surface across areas of new installation on an aggregate base.”

How do the Sisters of Mercy assess the results?

“When I see Sisters sitting in the garden and saying their prayers at 6 a.m. as the sun rises, when I see them gathered outside for exercise, when I see a staff member or visitor walking with a Sister along the circular path, I see the garden fulfilling our shared vision,” said Bambach. ☺

Project Team

- Owner: The Sisters of Mercy, Roxann Bambach, Administrator
- Landscape Architect: Design for Generations, LLC, Jack Carman, FASLA, RLA
- Landscape Contractor: Eric’s Nursery and Garden Center, Christopher Kendzierski, LLA, Landscaping Manager
- Pavement Installation Contractor: Rock & Block Design, Brian Geesey
- Permeable Pavement: Porous Pave, Inc.
- Permeable Pavement Representative: Splash Sales and Marketing, Inc., Jim Daulerio

hardscapes *Continued from page 16*

Porous Pave, Inc. (Grant, Mich.), a highly porous and durable pour-in-place paving material made from 50 percent recycled rubber chips and 50 percent kiln-dried aggregate mixed on site in a mortar mixer with a liquid binder. In contrast to permeable pavers, the entire surface of the installed product is permeable. With 27 percent void space, it infiltrates more stormwater than permeable pavers. The recycled rubber content makes it slip resistant, according to ASTM D-2047 standards, and in compliance with ADA requirements.

“This fulfilled our requirements for slip-resistant, permeable pavement. In addition, it is poured-in-place as one continuous surface without expansion joints, which adds an extra measure of safety,” said Carman. “The texture of the material when cured, and the available color options, enabled us to complement the landscape.”

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