When landscape architect David Hocker walks across his Lawther Drive client’s front lawn, he feels like tiptoeing for fear of disturbing the mourning doves, bees, butterflies, hummers and mockingbirds. No sooner than it developed last spring, the property’s first growing season in its new incarnation, did the native creatures discover this oasis of shelter and sustenance in the middle of an urban park and neighbors’ manicured, fertilized lawns.

Landscape alternatives to water-guzzling, chemically treated lawns of St. Augustine or Bermuda are a trendy topic across the United States. There are financial, environmental, practical and aesthetic reasons for replacing a front or back lawn with something else. But Hocker did not replace the lot’s turf with ornamentals, did not spread a pebbly cover of gravel or lay expanses of flagstone.

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Instead, he imposed his high sense of design on native flora to create a unique inner-city panorama. The design is futuristic (compared with its neighbors) and at the same time reminiscent of the original blackland prairie on which Dallas was created.
Hocker’s clients had considered restoring and enlarging the refined, eclectic, two-story house set far back from the lakefront on 4 acres. When they crunched the numbers, they thought of razing the 1936 house instead. In the end, the new owners repaired and updated the original 4,000-square-foot residence, once the home of Hassie Hunt, oilman H.L. Hunt’s firstborn son. They resisted making it bigger.

When the couple contacted Hocker, 32, about a landscape design, they highlighted what is important to them: wildlife and native plants. The wife also is an “avid organic gardener,” notes Hocker.

Using these starting points, Hocker got to know the site intimately over many visits before he proposed adding 100 native trees to the property and thousands of native plants. The front yard’s beauty spot, he suggested, would be a perfect ellipse near the foot of the lot. From the house, occupants would look over the graceful, near-acre ellipse planted with native grasses and wildflowers to White Rock Lake.

Hocker’s plan also called for eradicating the traditional lawn, a mix of St. Augustine and Bermuda, and replacing it with buffalo grass, a drought-tolerant native that has been developed into several hybrids selected for different regional requirements.

From the road, the grass looks like a typical lawn. It needs supplemental irrigation for the first year or two until it is established, then annual rainfall should suffice - unless the homeowners water it to prevent it from going into hot-weather dormancy. It is mowed, at most, twice a year. Although the landscape is formal across the front of the handsome, pink-brick house, Hocker planted the design with natives, not hollies, azaleas and liriope. He designed regiments of single species in precise rows, including southern wood ferns, Turk’s cap shrubs and Lindheimer’s muhly, a bunchgrass.
“As you come up out of the meadow, we designed in some intentional mass plantings up closer to the house,”
Hocker says. “A single Turk’s cap is interesting, but hundreds of them massed together are fabulous.” They
provide nectar for hummingbirds.

A mown path in the buffalo turf encircles the wildflower ellipse, which includes more than 30 native grass and
flower species. Hocker created a custom mix from the supplier, Native American Seed near Junction, Texas,
augmenting standards such as the bluebonnet, Indian blanket, lanceleaf coreopsis and lemon mint with western
ironweed, pigeonberry and Illinois bundleflower.

The custom mix, sown over the winter, “is on its first generation. That’s what is so exciting about natives,”
Hocker says. “The impact you start to get. To be walking along that mown path and have birds burst out of the
meadow, or see things swoop in, is pretty cool in an urban environment.”

Hocker makes the point that the drifts and colonies in the wildflower ellipse of his design happened naturally.
He did not force patterns or masses. He prepared a weed-free planting bed, sowed the seed, capped the seedbed
with hydromulch and waited for spring to see what would appear.

“We had the scale to pull this off,” Hocker acknowledges. “You couldn’t have this many species and pull it off
in your front yard. It’s evolving through the seasons, with the plant material going in and out of transition.”
To the landscape architect and his outdoors-loving clients, each transition brings its own rewards: not
only bountiful color and graceful, swaying stalks but also birds, insects, reptiles and mammals. From the
breathtaking sea of spring and summer flowers and the late-summer and autumnal seedheads to the still-life
study that will be a monochromatic winter silhouette, this front yard has no off season.
Resources

David Hocker, RLA, ASLA, Hocker Design Group. 214-915-0910; www.hockerdesign.com
Native American Seed (free catalog). 1-800-728-4043; www.seedsource.com
Texas Land Care (installation and maintenance). 214-350-7799

Plant list - Some of the seeds sown in the wild meadow ellipse include:
Texas bluebonnet
Indian blanket
Huisache daisy
American basketflower
Purple coneflower
Golden-wave coreopsis
Purple prairie clover
Drummond phlox
Bush sunflower
Maximilian sunflower
Gayfeather
Prairie wildrye
Sideoats grama Plains bristlegrass
Grasses, trees, shrubs:
Gulf muhly
Lindheimer’s muhly
Big bluestem
Little bluestem
Indian grass
Texas sedge
Prickly pear cactus
Dwarf palmetto
Mexican plum
Possumhaw holly
American beautyberry
Texas redbud