

Home improvement

Garden inspiration

Takats' created shady area out of love for trees

By **LOUISE RONALD**

The Commercial Review

Sheila Takats' garden was inspired by a dream.

But it didn't happen overnight.

More than 15 years before the dream, Sheila and her husband, Steve, purchased a farm northwest of Portland. That was in 1984.

"We had no intention of ever moving out here," she said, sitting in the kitchen of the home they built on the site of the farm's former barn in 2000.

The dream, Sheila remembers, happened in 2001 or '02.

It had to do with shade.

When the Takats bought the property, there were very few trees.

"We both love nature," Sheila said. "We love trees."

So in 1985, Steve got a pack of 100 young white pines, and the couple spent part of a cold, wet March planting them in an L-shaped grove around the barn.

Then the young trees needed to be nurtured.

"We came out every summer and watered them," Sheila said.

The barn had a spigot but the trees were too far away to reach with a hose.

See **Inspiration** page 8B



The garden at the home of Steve and Sheila Takats in rural Portland includes a dining area embellished with hanging crystals. The dream of a garden became a reality when the couple changed plans and moved to the farm northwest of Portland that they purchased in 1984.

The Commercial Review/Louise Ronald

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Robotic builder

Some firms are using automation to 'print' new homes

By MITCHELL PARTON
The Dallas Morning News
Tribune News Service

Hugo and Erica Briones, like thousands of other homebuyers in North Texas, are waiting patiently for their new home to be built — but their home is different.

Unlike most of the 48,000-plus new homes that began construction in Dallas-Fort Worth last year, the Briones' 1,700-square-foot, three-bedroom, two-bathroom house is one of only a few in the region built using a new method of construction, concrete 3D printing.

A handful of builders across Texas, large and small, are using giant automated machines to "print" homes, layer by layer, within weeks if not days. The "3D printers" control nozzles spouting concrete mix based on programmed coordinates, similar to a desktop 3D printer but at a much larger scale. They only require a small crew to operate.

"We decided to look around and compare prices, and we figured out that a conventional house is way more expensive than doing it this way," Erica said.

Builders and other experts in the local housing market say the technology could help avert labor shortages and sup-



Tribune News Service/The Dallas Morning News/Shafkat Anwar

Craig Pettit, president of MRB Robotics, monitors a 3D printer as it adds a layer of concrete to a future self-storage facility in Payne Springs. A handful of builders across Texas, large and small, are using giant automated machines to "print" homes, layer by layer, within weeks if not days.

ply issues and provide more affordable homes than traditionally built homes.

"In the race to satisfy the demand [for affordable

housing], the quality of construction is going down," said Sebin Joseph, chief technology officer and co-founder of Dallas startup Von Perry, which

is printing a home for the Brioneses. "The only way you can remedy that situation is by implementing automatic construction, which is far faster and

superior than conventional construction."

Phil Crone, executive director of the Dallas Builders Association, said he could see 3D-printed

homes become a much more substantial part of the market in 15 to 20 years as technology advances and labor issues continue.

See **Robotic** page 4B

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Interior of the first 3D printed house by MRB Robotics in Mabank. Owner Craig Pettit opted not to smoothen out the concrete material to instead create a unique loft-style look.



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Robotic ...

Continued from page 3B
“There’s every market incentive in the world for the built environment to find less labor-intensive options that don’t involve just a traditional stick-frame, lumber-centric framing process that we’ve done for hundreds of years,” Crone said. “It’s not surprising to see 3D printing jump into that arena.”

The space is rapidly evolving. In Houston, Germany-based Peri 3D Construction and Houston-based engineering firm Cive are building what is believed to be the coun-

try’s first 3D-printed home with two floors, NPR reported.

Still, 3D home printing is far from ready to be deployed at a scale that would rival lumber-built homes.

Very few printers are available for builders to use and the process itself has not yet been perfected.

“It’s certainly got a ways to go before it can build at the intricacy needed for most of today’s modern home plans,” Crone said. “I don’t foresee it being the majority of homes anytime soon,

but it is definitely a technology to watch.”

Cutting costs

The Brioneses sold their house in Plano about two years ago hoping to build a new home for the first time. They already had a spot in mind next to Erica’s parents’ home in the small town of Nevada in Collin County, which they saw as a quieter, calmer place to raise their family.

The family looked around for traditional builders to compare costs, but they found them to be too expensive.

See **Robotic** page 7B

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Rates have big impact on the housing market

By **MICHAEL E. KANELL**
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
Tribune News Service

ATLANTA — It wasn't the price, it was the rate.

Kevin Johnson and his wife closed in December on a newly constructed, five-bedroom, three-bath home in Dallas for \$449,000 — \$100,000 more than the price they got for their Powder Springs, Georgia, home — a move they weren't making because they really wanted to leave their home of eight years.

"Had we not found this one, we would have just stayed in our other house," he said.

Mortgage rates had been climbing all year, shoved higher by the Federal Reserve's steady hikes in short-term interest rates, a campaign aimed at cooling inflation that had also been chilling the housing market. But as mortgage rates soared, Johnson found a builder who offered an "in-house" mortgage at 3.9%.

"That incentive made the difference," he said. "If there's one thing I can do, it's arithmetic."

Prices matter, but rates are crucial.

The median list price of a metro Atlanta home has risen 34% in five years, according to Realtor.com, a challenge to affordability. In early February, just 10% of listings were at \$250,000 or below, according to broker Kristen Jones of Re/Max Around Atlanta.

Prices have been rising faster than incomes, and not just in Atlanta.

"I think our biggest concern is continuing to find affordability for the majority of Americans," said Ryan Marshall, chief executive of Atlanta-based PulteGroup, the nation's third-largest homebuilder. "Most people who buy a house take a mortgage and

Michael E. Kanell



the impact that the Fed has on affordability is front and center," he told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

The median sales price of a metro Atlanta home in January was \$360,000, according to the Georgia Multiple Listing Service.

The fiercest demand is for lower-priced homes, but the higher prices go, the more interest rates are a factor, said Richard Key, a broker with Village Premier Collection. "We saw a lot of people step back and wait for the rates to come down. And then we saw an influx of buyers into the market in the new year."

When rates dip, they can bring higher-priced homes within reach of cash-strapped buyers. Higher rates can put the same homes out of reach.

Even if it doesn't chase a wannabe buyer out of the market, it changes calculations, said John Ryan, chief marketing officer for Georgia MLS. "For the average home buyer, the rise in rates could mean the difference between an extra bedroom, or a compromise on the location or desired features of a property."

In mid-2021, the average 30-year mortgage rate was 2.77%. Back then, a borrower with a 20% down payment could buy a \$400,000 home and have a monthly payment of \$1,638, according to Bankrate. As the Fed started hiking, rates rose in early 2022 to 3.55%.

That increased the monthly tab by \$136.

When rates dip, they can bring higher-priced homes within reach of cash-strapped buyers.

Higher rates can put the same homes out of reach.

Painful, but the rate had just begun to bite.

The Fed kept shoving and rates kept climbing and by mid-November, they averaged 7.37%, according to Mortgage News Daily, which meant that same buyer would face a monthly payment of \$2,538, up more than \$1,000-a-month from the rock-bottom rates of 2021.

No wonder many buyers left the market.

Sales in the dozen counties centered around Atlanta were down 38% in November from the same month a year before, according to Georgia MLS.

While the Fed sets the ground floor for borrowing, it doesn't dictate mortgage rates. Other factors — the broader economy, inflation, the market for other investments, the buyer's credit worthiness — also figure in. And in the last few weeks of the year, mortgage rates fell so that same borrower would pay \$2,274 — up \$636 from two years ago, but a bargain compared to November.

See Rates page 9B

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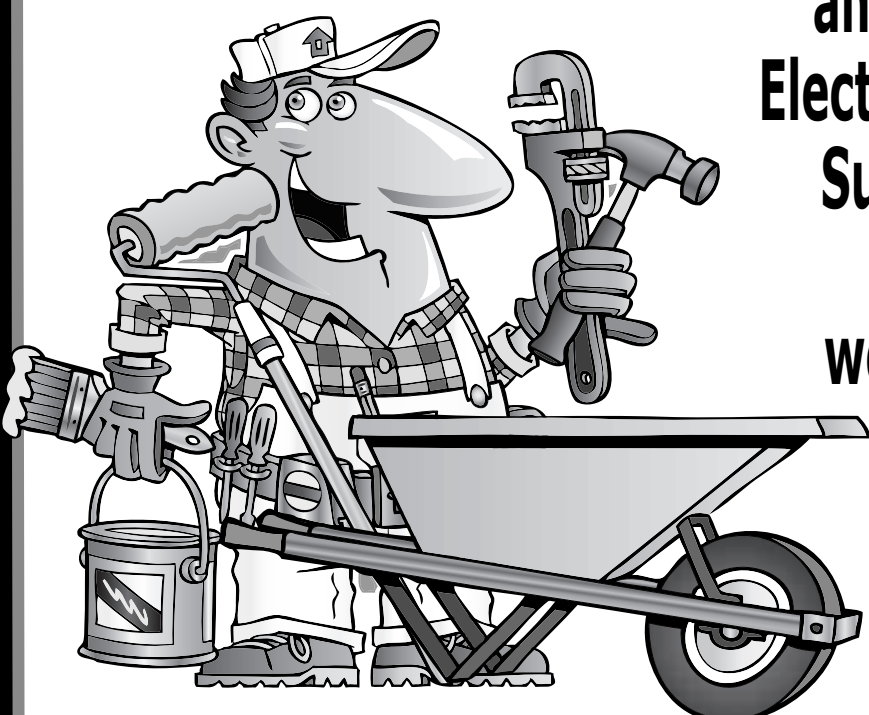
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Exterior renovations can bring big returns

Remodeling with a return on investment in mind can be a smart strategy for homeowners, whether one is thinking about moving in the next few months or further down the road.

Though this approach is an inexact science, in many instances, it's savvy for homeowners to consider what buyers may want when planning home improvements.

Homeowners may be surprised to learn which renovations garner the best ROI at resale. The home loan and refinancing company RenoFi indicates that overall home improvement projects provide a 70% ROI on average. Many high-ROI projects add functional space and improvement.

The following are some exterior renovations that help homeowners recoup the most money at resale, according to Remodeling magazine's "2022 Cost vs. Value Report."

1. Garage Door Replacement: 93.3% recouped of \$4,041 cost
2. Manufactured Stone Veneer: 91.4% recouped of \$11,066 cost
3. Siding replacement (fiber cement): 68.3% recouped of \$22,093 cost
4. Window replacement (vinyl): 67.5% recouped of \$20,482 cost
5. Siding replacement (vinyl): 67.2% recouped of \$18,662 cost
6. Window replacement (wood): 66.3% recouped of \$24,388 cost

7. Deck addition (wood): 64.8% recouped of \$19,248 cost

8. Entry Door Replacement (steel): 63.8% recouped of \$2,206 cost

The majority of renovations on Remodeling magazine's list of the best investments are exterior renovations, making this area of a home a particular point of interest for homeowners. The only interior project that cracked the Top 10 ROI for projects was a minor midrange kitchen remodel.

Exterior renovations perhaps add the most bang for your buck because they're not only functional, but also because they add immediate curb appeal. Much in the way it has been said people eat with their eyes first — which is why chefs spend so much time on elaborate plating — buyers will judge a property by how it looks when they arrive, even before they've stepped inside a home. In essence, home buyers often judge a book by its cover. A worn exterior may indicate to potential buyers that the home was not maintained, however false that assumption may be.

It's important for homeowners to consider all factors before beginning a renovation. Certain projects offer a stronger return on investment than others, and that's a significant consideration for homeowners thinking of selling their homes.

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Robotic ...

Continued from page 4B
Then, about a year ago, Erica's brother Gerardo Alvarez, an architectural student at the University of Texas at Arlington, introduced them to a young entrepreneur he works as a designer who had a solution.

Treyvon Perry, 22, had dropped out of UT Arlington at the end of 2021 to focus on Von Perry, a company he started when he was just 17 years old. The company originally centered around designing homes using different types of sustainable materials, but later realized the cost to actually build those homes would be too high.

In 2020, Perry started researching 3D printing and decided to fully adopt the technology to build homes while also exploring the use of sustainable materials in the process.

"When people think of Von Perry, they think of us just as a 3D-printing company," Perry said. "Well, no, that's not really our mission. Our goal is to produce sustainable infrastructure and bring it to the mass market at an affordable price."

The Briones family started talking to Perry about how much more affordable, efficient and resistant to the Texas weather the home would be. For the Brioneses, the 3D-printed home cost about \$200,000, while a smaller traditionally built home would have cost more than \$300,000. The family also looked at mobile homes, but decided the concrete-printed home would be a much better deal.

Printing kicked off in November. Hugo, a machine operator in McKinney, said he has been telling his coworkers about the home, and that they are already interested in visiting the house and even wanting to submit an application to build their own. The Brioneses' home

will be fully complete in March.

"All the people that I talk to about the home, they like the idea and the price and everything," he said.

Von Perry has two other projects in the design phase as it continues to experiment with the technology. The company is looking into using recycled plastic for interior walls and printing using different materials than simple cement in the future.

Perry was originally looking into manufacturing the machines, but decided that would be too costly and time-intensive and chose to focus on buying printers made by others and act essentially as a project manager. The company is currently using a printer made by Minnesota firm Total Kustom.

But relying on third parties for the printers presents another challenge, the extraordinarily small number of them available in the country, which Joseph says is "probably less than 10." That, in addition to weather, led to delays in printing their first house for the Brioneses.

"We got a lot of rainy days and very cold days when the mix wasn't working very well on, because that the printing should be in an optimal temperature," Joseph said. "So we had to figure out all those things."

Out by the lake

In Mabank, a small town along Cedar Creek Lake southeast of Dallas that has seen an influx of builders looking to build affordable homes, another small business called MRB Robotics has already completed two 3D-printed homes.

The company's founder, Craig Pettit, previously worked in data processing and has been fixing and flipping homes as a side gig for more than a decade. While looking into build-



Tribune News Service/The Dallas Morning News/Shafkat Anwar

Tom Bugg, left, of Kitchen Logistics LLC consults with Treyvon Perry, CEO and founder of Von Perry, about designing a kitchen for a home the company is constructing with a 3D printer in Nevada, Texas.

ing new homes in late 2020, a friend sent him an email about the concept of 3D concrete printing.

"I felt like with my computer science and construction background, I'd be in a unique position to get a head start on the new technology," he said.

Pettit's printer is a prototype he bought from another manufacturer and has since modified. Even with it being new technology, he said he expected the printer to work right out of the box like a paper printer but found that many different factors from structural to mechanical to weather can get in the way. It takes practice to perfect the process, he says.

"The trick is that the speed of the printer has to match the speed of the pump," Pettit said. "If the

printer is moving faster than the pump, the wall will be too thin. If the printer is moving slower than the pump, the wall will be too thick."

Pettit started printing his first three-bedroom house in Mabank in November 2021 and got to work on another home the following month. The first home took 10 days to print, and the second took just six days, followed by four to five months for a general contractor to finish them with a roof, utilities, windows and doors.

A resident started leasing the second house about two to three months ago, and the first is on the market for \$1,500 per month, said Pettit.

Now, Pettit is finishing a 14-unit self-storage facility just outside of Mabank in

Payne Springs, which he started working on in August 2022. While factors such as rain and stopping to make some engineering changes created some delay, he said that in ideal conditions he could have printed the facility in a week.

Pettit plans to continue printing houses and self-storage facilities and is looking into a project to build a "retail village" in Highland Village that could start as soon as the third quarter of this year.

He also plans to start another home in Mabank in February, and by the end of 2023, he expects to begin selling his own machines to small- to mid-sized homebuilders that he says "will be as easy as opening a box and printing a house."

Pettit said that because 3D printers can form hous-

es in any shape, designs are possible that would be very costly using traditional construction methods — like a 25-foot wave wall with vase-like contours he printed as part of the storage project. He says his homes are also more resistant to floods, wind, termites, mold, fire, noise and heat.

Thinking big

One of the earliest and biggest players in the 3D building-printing space was Austin-based Icon that has raised \$451 million since its inception in 2017.

The company has printed 3D homes and structures across the U.S. and Mexico, from market-rate homes to disaster-relief housing, military barracks and homes for the homeless.

See **Robotic** page 9B

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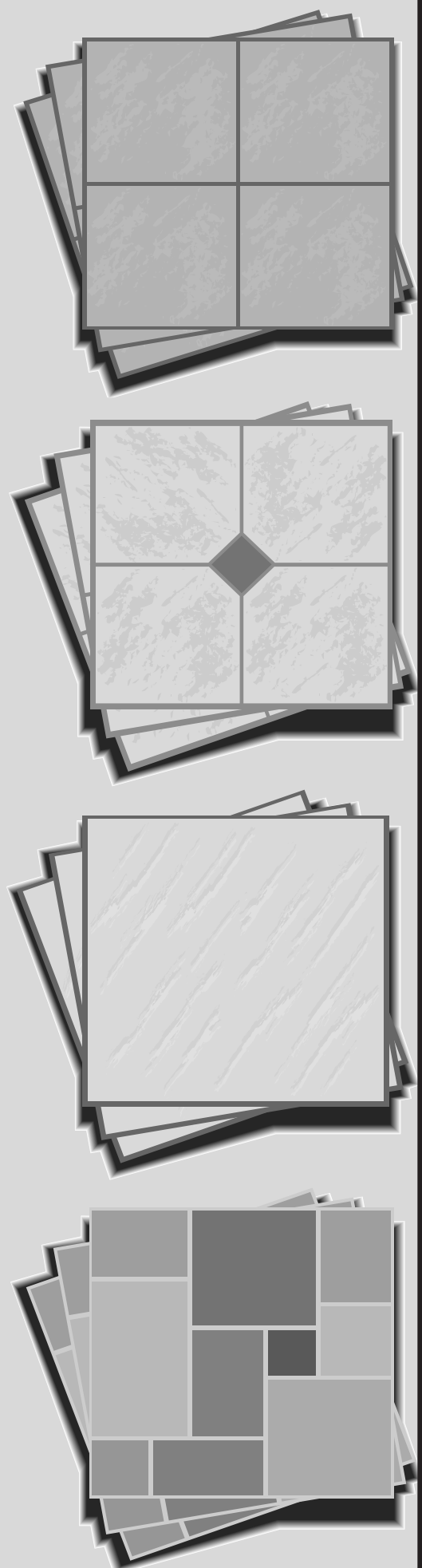




Photo provided

The "primitive" part of the garden includes this metalwork moose. It was made for Sheila Takats by one of her former students (she taught language arts at Portland and Jay County high schools). "I have no idea why I love a moose, but I do," she said.

Inspiration ...

Continued from page 1B
"We carried buckets of water to 100 trees," she said. For several years. By the time the house was built, the trees were well estab-

lished around the north and west sides of the family's new home. "After we moved here, I could plant all sorts of flowers and bushes in the sun," said Sheila,

"but I like shade plants as well. I thought I would love to have a place for shade plants." The dream gave her the answer. "You have an area for shade

in the trees that you planted," it told her. Sheila only needed to be told once. The next morning, she went out to the pine grove with a

handsaw and started cutting the lower branches off the trees. She didn't use a ladder, just reached as high as she could. See **Inspiration** page 10B



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Rates ...

Continued from page 5B
Thomas Hulme and his wife have been staying with her family since moving back to Atlanta last year. They've been house-hunting for something between \$450,000 and \$650,000, he said. "And that's really stretching. But you can only live with your in-laws for so long."

He's a broker for Re/Max, so he knows the market, and he marvels at the way rates move buyers.

"When the rates are a half-point or a full point higher, it just makes it so much harder for people. It really changes the game."

As rates dipped, they found themselves in competition for desirable homes, he said. "We've made three offers on three houses and come up short."

Competition could get even more heated. This week, the average dipped to 5.99%, according to Mortgage News Daily.

To be sure, even the fall's higher rates were not historically high: From 1971 until the summer of 2001, the average mortgage rates dipped below 7% only for a few weeks.

But last fall's rates were just as surely a big change from the immediate past. The last time mortgage rates averaged more than 7% was the late winter of 2002. An entire generation of homebuyers has borrowed money cheaper than a buyer

entering the market in November.

That means almost no one has an incentive to refinance their mortgage. It also means most owners who sell will face an increase in their rates if they buy another home.

That keeps many potential sellers from ever putting their homes on the market, said Warren Wachsberger, chief executive of AECOM Capital, a real estate investor and developer, which

recently started construction of a 500-unit apartment complex next to Piedmont Park.

It's hard to predict how long it will take the Fed to be satisfied that it has reduced inflation, which is partly about prices, but also about the Fed's attitude, he said.

"The question is, how long will it take to unwind about \$8 trillion of stimulus put into the economy?" Wachsberger said. "The one certainty is that we don't know."

Robotic ...

Continued from page 7B
Icon even has contracts with NASA to build research and develop construction systems for infrastructure on the moon.

"We've really got to fundamentally be reimagining what is possible in a future with machines that can work around the clock," said Dmitri Julius, Icon's chief of special projects. "Yes, we've got a consumer housing problem, but we also have this broader global housing crisis that's impacting humanity, and I don't think any of us are comfortable with the current solutions."

In November, Icon and publicly traded home-builder Lennar said they had begun construction of a community of 100 3D-printed homes within the Wolf Ranch master-planned community in Georgetown, a suburb of Austin, using a fleet of their Vulcan 3D printers.

"For us, this represents the beginning," Julius said. "Houses by the thousands and tens of thousands is what we believe these printers will be able to deliver in the future."

Lennar developed the land and handled the foundation for the homes. Icon's 3D printers, using a proprietary concrete mix called Lavacrete and controlled by an iPhone or iPad app, will deliver all

the home's walls. Lennar's traditional trade partners will then install a roof, finish out the interiors, deliver appliances, install electrical systems and do the landscaping.

Each is co-designed by the Bjarke Ingels Group, which is based out of Denmark and New York City. The three- and four-bedroom homes range from about 1,600 to 2,100 square feet of living space and will start in the mid-\$400,000s — around the same price as nearby traditionally built homes. Reservations begin this year.

"The fit, finish and fixtures in these homes are going to be equal to if not better than the houses that you're used to seeing in your normal, everyday master-planned community," Julius said. "These are ready for primetime."

Charlie Coleman, Austin division president for Lennar, said he first met Icon founders Evan and Jason Ballard just over two years ago after seeing them present 3D-printed tiny homes at the South by Southwest conference in Austin.

Coleman said the technology could help the company build high-quality homes more affordably and more efficiently with fewer workers on site.

"I think this could really help by introducing some

technology to help fill in a gap where we just don't have enough of our trade partners and our labor to build, certainly in our market," he said.

Balda, who has led Dallas-based Hillwood Communities for more than 30 years, said he was quick to jump on board when Lennar approached his company with the idea of working with Icon in their Wolf Ranch neighborhood, seeing it as a solution to the supply chain and labor challenges that have ravaged the industry.

"The last couple of years and homebuilding has been horrendous for many reasons," he said. "We thought this technology might help address some of those issues that we're all seeing."

Balda said the concept of concrete homes made by a giant printer wasn't too far off from homes already built on concrete cinder blocks in Florida to withstand hurricanes, making it easy for him to digest the idea. The development veteran said he hopes to bring 3D-printed homes to other communities in North Texas, but is not in talks to do so quite yet.

"We need all these different ideas to come to the marketplace to help address the supply issue that we're currently dealing with."



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- Is a teacher who lives in our coverage area
- Is a teacher who previously lived in our coverage area

To nominate, send us a letter that includes your name, the name of the teacher being nominated, their school, the grade(s) and subject(s) they teach and your reasons for nominating them.

The deadline is March 31.

You can send it to news@thecr.com (preferred) or The Commercial Review, Teacher of the Year nomination, P.O. Box 1049, Portland, IN 47371



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Inspiration ...

Continued from page 8B
“It took me two summers to clear the area so I could make a path and a place to plant,” she said.

Now, two decades later, she has an amazing garden filled with plants, furniture, artwork and embellishments like crystals and even chandeliers.

The garden forms a kind of tunnel through and among the pines. Sheila created an entry near the back door of the house. Visitors are greeted by the sculpture of a young woman (a Mother’s Day gift from Steve), part of what Sheila calls the “elegant” portion of the garden, which also includes a dining area with bistro tables.

One of her favorite finds is a metalwork copy of a famous poster by Alphonse Mucha that came from the Tri-State Antique Engine and Tractor Show.

Continue along the path and the mood changes — culminating in an outhouse.

“It goes from pristine to primitive,” Sheila said with a laugh.

Steve discovered the outhouse when he was cleaning up a forest on another of their properties.

It’s a solid structure built by the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s, complete with an identification number. (It is not, however, a working outhouse, but a playhouse for the children of the family.)

Next to the outhouse is a large metal moose created for Sheila by one of her former students (she taught language arts at Portland and Jay County high schools).

“I have no idea why I love a moose, but I do,” she said.

The statuary is secured so that it can stay outside year-round. The embellishments and more than 50 container plants are moved into a barn for the winter.

“I relish this time of year coming up — going out and getting ready to dress it up,” said Sheila.

The process takes two to three weeks, then another two to three weeks at the end of the season to put it all away again.

“A big garden like this is not for everyone,” she said. “You’ve got to be ready to do some work.”

Steve helps with moving boulders from other parts of their property (“I love rocks,” said Sheila) and tackling other major jobs. He also likes to have a good nap in the garden, according to his wife.

As for Sheila, “it is my sanctuary. I love to ... be there alone and read and meditate and listen and smell and just take in the

sights and sounds of Mother Nature.”

The garden is constantly evolving. As some of the original trees have died, there are more sunny areas, allowing different kinds of planting. Sheila has included a cutting garden, a moon garden (all white), a water garden, a fairy garden and a butterfly garden.

The only thing not growing there is vegetables.

It all sounds ambitious, but Sheila had little gardening experience when she started.

“I’d mowed a yard before and I’d trimmed, but that’s about it.”

She encourages others to try to think about what kind of garden they could create in whatever space they have — even if it’s only a window box.

“Part of the reason we’re doing this is to inspire others,” she said. “Use the space that you have and make it your own. It doesn’t have to be large. In fact, large can be pretty dog-gone overwhelming.”

—Sheila Takats

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