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Chris H. Olsen, the House On the Hill and the Art of Mixing It Up

by **Jess Ardrey** on **June 29, 2018**

Categories: Profiles (<https://www.littlerocksoiree.com/category/1091/profiles>), Executive Privilege (<https://www.littlerocksoiree.com/category/1093/executive-privilege>)



One spring, on a Sunday, Chris H. Olsen was driving through North Little Rock's Park Hill neighborhood when he spotted it: a dilapidated, boarded-up house with an old pickup truck with a flat tire in the yard.

"It was literally falling apart," Olsen says, "but it was beautiful."

Within half an hour, and with the help of some friendly neighbors, he had a key in hand and was exploring the residence at 257 Skyline Drive.

You can see it from a distance, the white stucco walls gleaming against a backdrop of lush greenery. Cinnamon-colored tile lines the nine steps leading to the entryway, and intricate wrought iron encases the windows.

The Edgemont House has undergone extensive renovations since Olsen bought it in June of 2016, though no structural changes have been made to the 1927 Spanish colonial revival-style home. Known previously as the Justin Matthews Jr. House, the estate is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

According to Olsen, the Matthews built the house on the area's highest point to add to its grandeur, thus establishing the Edgemont neighborhood, the answer to Little Rock's prestigious Edgehill neighborhood. But when the Great Depression hit shortly after, that vision faded, lending the area to the mosaic of home styles and sizes it knows today.

Olsen, owner of Little Rock's Botanica Gardens and North Little Rock's Plantopia Home and Garden Center, didn't question his love-at-first-sight reaction to Edgemont. Originally from Connecticut, his family then moved to Little Rock where he spent a few years before moving to San Diego, then back to Arkansas in 1992. But it was in Park Hill that he found the perfect blend of his roots in both Spanish and colonial-style homes.

"It's the weirdest thing. It's like this house was built for me," he says. "I always love a long house with glass on both sides. I always wanted a Spanish house, I always wanted a sunken family room, I always wanted a turret and I always wanted a U-shaped house with an inner courtyard. I literally once drew out a house design that had all of these elements, and it was right here waiting for me in North Little Rock all along."

For Olsen, his love of landscape began on the east coast. His father was an actuary, and to blow off steam from a stressful job, turned the family backyard into a large orchard and vegetable garden. Olsen took to it right away, both as a way to connect with his father, but also as a newfound passion. He used the money earned on his paper route to buy plants at nurseries on the weekend, grew them in the greenhouse window his father built for him and then sold his produce to neighbors from the wagon he pulled down the street.

"My only addiction in life is plants. I can't get enough of them," Olsen says. "You'd think being around them and that being my business I'd be completely tired of them, but no. They're everywhere I am!"

His collective enthusiasm for plants translates into his landscape philosophy, a style unique enough that Olsen literally trademarked the word he made up to describe it, "jhemajang." Pronounced "hem-a-jang," the term refers to "taking different elements — some related, some unrelated — and mixing them up in such a fun and funky way that it just works."

"It's the art of mixing it up," he says with a shrug and a smile.



And while much of today's trends rely on recreating looks found online, Olsen holds to one law: buying only what he loves.

"There are no rules; it's just whatever you like," he says. "All people do is just copy each other because that's all they know or because they're afraid to 'jhemajang' it. It's not about matching, it's not about symmetry, it's all about balance."

And it's this openness that has brought Olsen opportunities over the years such as his 15-year partnership with and weekly segment on KTHV 11, as well as public speaking engagements nationwide. Even his involvement in the communities has expanded to include beautification efforts at the Big Dam Bridge and in Park Hill.

Everything from his long-standing relationship with the biennial Arkansas Symphony Designer House to using Edgemont as a venue for small functions, it all goes back to strengthening his connection with the surrounding community, calling the house "a beautiful gem that should be shared."

"North Little Rock is home now," he says. "Everything happens for a reason."

As for popular culture's recent return to plant care and home redesigns, according to Olsen, that's no accident either. With people stuck inside more now than ever, his theory is that homes have become more important again in the way they were in the 1950s. Especially as the 2008 recession hit, he noticed a rise in business as

customers invested more in their homes and less in expenses like extravagant trips.

Even Olsen's outlook on business has changed. Before opening Botanica Gardens, he and his father started Horticare Landscape Companies, but as it grew Olsen realized it was time for him to part ways with the business.

"I lost the creative part of it. All I did was solve problems all day long because that's what a business owner does," he says. "I started Botanica in order to get back to that part. Now I've grown again, but I've made sure to never lose that. I am the landscape designer and I pull everything myself in the morning for the crews because it's still my design. I don't want to move out of that element."

That creative awareness is crucial for Olsen. And as his businesses grow and his public appearances become more common, his motivation still comes from reflection.

"My greatest competitor is myself," he says. "The only person I need to outdo is me. That's my greatest challenge, and it's a lot of work, but I love it."

Olsen's enthusiasm is contagious as he expresses his love for the "why not" in life.

"It's funny. You just never thought you'd have certain things, but because you weren't afraid to go after it, you do. I was terrified of this house, and I'm still terrified of this house. I call it 'the beast,'" he laughs. "But every day I walk down those stairs and I say a prayer and count my blessings.

"For now I'm only the steward of this house. There will be another family in this house, another person sitting in this room, and my time will always be part of this house, a little piece of history for Edgemont."

Getting to Know Chris



What landscaping question do you get asked the most?

Most clients, the first thing that comes out of their mouths is "low maintenance." There's no such thing as no maintenance, but there is such thing as low maintenance.

What is your tried-and-true tip for entertaining?

The best thing for entertaining is just don't worry about it and enjoy your party. Planning takes a lot of work, but before people come in the door, no matter what has happened or gone wrong, I forget about it, make myself a big vodka tonic and just enjoy my party. Plus, I've learned when you entertain, you never get to the food, so eat before the party starts and pour yourself a big glass because you're not going to go to the bar.

What's your favorite part of summer in Arkansas?

Here's a tip in life: Have friends that have lake houses and boats! I love going to the lake at Heber Springs. I only get Sundays off, but in the summer sometimes I'll try to take Saturdays off, too, so I can get some time at the lake with my friends. It's where I relax. You lay out in the sun with your with friends and you feel like you're far away. I don't bring my cell phone; if something ever happened I would never know, and I like it that way.

What's your favorite season for the house?

Fall. Coming from Connecticut (what I call a real fall), I'm fascinated with pumpkins and gourds and stuff like that. It brings me the most joy because it reminds me of my childhood. My birthday is in November, so a lot of times growing up, I would have my birthday parties in October because I would always want Halloween parties. I wish all year long was fall. The rich colors, the cool, crisp air in the mornings, I love it all. In August and September, when I can sense fall on the horizon, I know it's coming and I get really excited.

If you had to pick one plant for each season, what would they be?

It's so hard to only pick one! For spring it would be the English primrose. They're bright and colorful and some of them have sweet fragrance. They grow along streams and remind me of San Diego. For summertime, I love tropical plants, but I just love coneflowers and black-eyed Susans. For fall I love mums. I know they're short-lived, but their smell reminds me of childhood, so I've always got to have mums. In the wintertime, I would say an assortment of evergreens like lemon cypress to bring inside and not just do the same old poinsettia.

Do you have any new landscaping skills you're itching to learn?

It's not so much techniques, but more plant material. I'm always trying to find cool, fun, unusual and unique plants that will thrive in the South that no one really knows. It doesn't have to be new, it can be an old plant coming back. I love to use old-fashioned plants in my designs that no one has used since the 1970s.

Do you have any favorites in that category?

Oh, I love the golden euonymus. It's just a golden yellow plant that everyone sees in the old homesteads. Yellow is my favorite color and it's the first color your eye is attracted to. I use it in everything to draw attention, and the golden euonymus just glows in the dark. I have it in my front yard as a hedge.

What do you do in the little free time you have?

I work in the yard. My greatest therapy is to leave the phone inside and to putz around in the yard. I like to go to local nurseries first thing in the morning before the crowds go, and no, I don't always shop at my own nurseries. I do it first thing Sunday morning, and then I come home and play in the yard. For some people relaxation is drinking a cup of coffee or watching a movie, but for me it's being outdoors. I always wish I could spend more time outside and not be rushed.



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