



Gracious Gardens

Five ways to enhance your outdoor space

| By Debra Prinzing Photos by William Wright



When you observe your yard, what do you see? Perhaps you notice an underperforming front lawn, a neglected patio or a barren patch where the kids once played. Ask yourself, “Is my landscape delivering the best return on my home investment?” If the answer is no, it’s time for an upgrade. You can create an enviable outdoor area, no matter how small the space. The key is to make the most of the space you have. You’ll be rewarded with a more attractive environment, while also adding value to your home. Below are some tips on maximizing the potential of your landscape.

Plant a garden that feeds you

Growing edibles is one of today’s most popular gardening activities. According to a 2009 Garden Writers Association consumer garden-trends survey, approximately two-thirds of people with gardens are planning to grow their own vegetables this year.

“More people want a year-round edible garden,” says seed purveyor Rose Marie Nichols McGee, president of Nichols Garden Nursery in Albany, Oregon, and co-author of *McGee & Stuckey’s The Bountiful Container* (Workman Publishing, 2002). “We’re seeing a lot of first-time seed buyers and getting notes from people that say, ‘I haven’t gardened in years, but now I’m going to do it again.’”

Many of these “grow-it-yourselfers” have embraced edible gardening because it allows them to enjoy a nutritious, affordable backyard food source.

Convert a prosaic section of your backyard, patio or deck into a useful space by planting a bounty of vegetables, herbs, berries and other fruits. Start with an inexpensive packet of seeds, or pick up a flat of 4-inch “veggie starts,” such as salad greens or peas, at a garden center or specialty nursery.

An outdoor living room, such as this one designed by Santa Monica-based landscape architect Joseph Marek, provides a comfortable exterior space for relaxing.

For urban gardeners tight on space, carrots, radishes, herbs and edible flowers all make tasty additions to a window box. Many small landscapes even have room for a few fruit trees, especially if you choose espalier varieties, which are trained to grow flat against a support, such as a fence.

People with small-scale gardens will find that pots and other containers come in handy, says Nichols McGee. Columnar apple varieties and dwarf citrus are ideal fruit trees for containers. Beans, carrots, parsley and basil can thrive in flowerpots on the back deck.

"For the person who has just a tiny bit of space but wants to grow really good ingredients, I recommend lemon thyme, Aussie Sweetie [Greek columnar basil], bay laurel and rosemary," she says. "You can also get a small, fruiting cherry tomato and train it up a trellis."

Foodies appreciate that a garden can supply all sorts of exotic, heirloom and ethnic flavors that can be costly or difficult to find at the store, says Seattle-based garden designer and writer Lorene Edwards Forkner.

Edwards Forkner—co-author of *Growing Your Own Vegetables* (Sasquatch Books, 2009)—suggests choosing dual-purpose plants that are ornamental as well as edible, such as rhubarb, which yields a tart cooking flavor and lends drama to the landscape with its oversize leaves. Another of her favorites is an evergreen semidwarf blueberry shrub called Sunshine Blue: "It serves all the purposes of an ornamental plant, plus it has a lovely crop."

Increase your living space

Make it possible to use your yard in new ways—such as for cooking, eating, entertaining and even sleeping—by designating outdoor "rooms." Not only do these planned spaces allow you to spend time outdoors comfortably, but "from a financial standpoint, creating outdoor living spaces is like adding extra rooms to your total square footage," says Jennifer Gilbert Asher, a Los Angeles-based garden designer and artist. This is the perfect way to maximize a smaller property, because it gives the illusion that you have more space than you actually do.

Start by looking at the footprint of your yard and considering how to get the most out of every nook

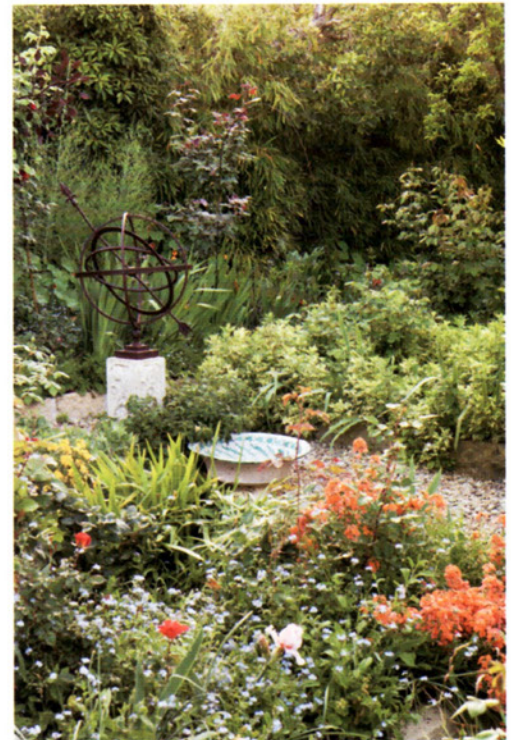


and cranny. Then allocate room-size sections, correlating to well-trafficked rooms in your home, where you can spend time doing everyday activities. Depending on your area's climate, you may not want to be outdoors year-round, but this smart design approach will prepare otherwise nondescript corners of your landscape for use during pleasant weather.

The concept of a room implies enclosure—a feeling of protection and separateness from the rest of the world. But you don't need four walls and a ceiling to capture this feeling. Simply "furnish" your fresh-air room with sensory pleasures inspired by nature, such as lighting provided by the sun and moon; temperature control provided by gentle breezes and shade; and privacy screens provided by trees and bushes. Situate the space to highlight any appealing views, such as the forest or city beyond your yard.

To create a space that brings the comfort of the indoors outside, reimagine your favorite interior design features and amenities for outdoor living. This might mean building a covered patio complete with dimmable lights, a ceiling fan, speakers and a plasma television.

"I'm designing a lot of spaces for clients who want to watch sports on TV while relaxing outdoors," remarks Alison Terry, a Fullerton, California-based landscape architect. "Indoor living rooms can be so



Top left: Fruit-bearing trees are a nutritious backyard food source.

Above: Choose sculpture and other artwork that complements your planting design.

Below: Incorporating outdoor lighting and a fire pit into your yard can extend its use into the evening hours.

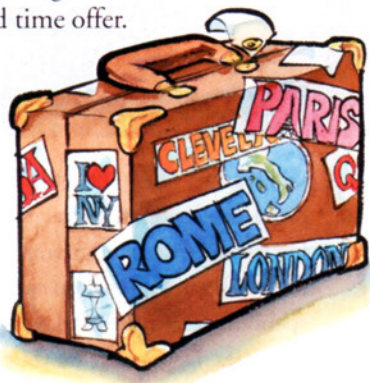


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cramped—why not take the same functions and amenities outside?”

Another popular room to create outdoors is the kitchen, says Terry. She designs exterior cooking spaces for clients that feature everything from old-fashioned charcoal barbecues to gas ranges with side burners, to smokers and pizza ovens.

“The whole idea of outdoor cooking is appealing—it goes along with the movement of buying local and growing your own food, so your fresh ingredients are right at your fingertips,” she says.

Spend your evenings outdoors

Rather than looking out the window after dark and seeing only the glow of a neighborhood street lamp, infuse your landscape with golden pools of light. Outdoor lighting—ranging from candles and fire pits to strings of carnival lights and up-lit trees—can lend a feeling of mystery and romance when incorporated into your yard. These features not only warm and illuminate the space, but also make it more usable, and enjoyable, during the evening hours.

Outdoor lighting can be customized to suit many purposes, such as providing safety by highlighting pathways and steps, defining architectural and design features, and creating depth and dimension. The right lighting can bring an otherwise unseen specimen tree, fountain or sculpture to life at night, or cause branches and boughs to cast interesting architectural patterns against a wall or the side of your home.

For a dramatic addition to your garden's repertoire, invest in an outdoor fireplace or fire pit. The presence of flickering flames instantly makes the mood more special.

“A fireplace provides a heat source that draws people together,” says Terry. “It is irresistible to adults and children alike—like a magnet attracting people outdoors.”

When Terry wanted to create additional space outside the tight quarters of her 1,500-square-foot bungalow, she devised a dining patio, at the heart of which stands a full-size gas-burning fireplace with a tall chimney, a welcoming hearth and a curved bench extending on both sides.

“We don't have enough space in our house, but [the dining patio] is like an extra

room," she says. "Every time we light a fire, my kids want to roast marshmallows."

Create an outdoor gallery

Artful objects—such as sculpture, salvaged architectural fragments or even a bird-bath—help give your garden a personality. Precious objects, displayed alongside the foliage and flowers, or partially hidden among favorite plants, communicate volumes about the owner's taste and style. They also serve to enhance a garden during the winter months, when the trees are bare and the landscape is dormant.

According to Jennifer Gilbert Asher—co-founder of the Terra Sculpture outdoor sculpture collection with Karen Neill—artwork has the power to alter the mood of the space in which it appears.

"I place sculpture in the garden not just to complement the space, but to transform it," she says. "A captivating sculpture can spike curiosity and provoke thought. It can be playful, meditative or even sensual."

When choosing artwork, consider the

scale of the piece—including its material, shape and form—and how it relates to your garden, home and the greater environment.

"You should take into account not only the immediate surroundings, but also the background," says Gilbert Asher. "A mountain, an ocean view, the sky, or even a fence or wall should all be considered."

A good way to gauge whether a three-dimensional piece of sculpture is appropriate for a residential-garden setting is to compare it to an average-height adult. Rooftop gardens or vast swaths of lawn can visually accommodate a human-size sculpture. Smaller gardens, such as those on a balcony or patio, are better suited to smaller-scale artwork.

Another consideration is placement. While your first instinct may be to situate a sculpture at the base of your patio steps, perhaps there's a better spot for it. As you stand in the garden, use your eyes as a guide. What area earns your notice? Is it a bare spot beneath the canopy of a sycamore tree? Or is it a sweeping lawn

enclosed by an evergreen hedge? These may be the ideal venues for favorite pieces.

Once you pick a spot, consider where people most often will be sitting or standing while viewing the art—be it poolside or from inside the home. "To me, the most comfortable place for a focal point [such as a sculpture] is eye level," says Gilbert Asher.

Incorporating artwork into the landscape also calls for a dose of restraint. Take a walk through your yard and eliminate clutter and anything kitschy. Strive to add extraordinary pieces, while removing objects that don't distinguish themselves.

Treat the garden as a place of refuge

At the end of the day and on weekends, your garden should be a wonderful place to rest, relax and reconnect with family and friends.

Four design elements will help cocoon you in a quiet, private setting that soothes the spirit and the senses. The first is trees. "Trees can provide privacy and shade, and they are good for resale," says Gilbert Asher. While you're waiting for a shade

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tree to mature, create a "roof" overhead with a picnic umbrella.

Where you place the trees depends on the climate of your area. Homes in warmer areas, such as Los Angeles or Las Vegas, often rely on evergreen trees planted on the west or south side for shade. In more seasonal climates, such as Seattle or San Francisco, deciduous shade trees allow sunlight to warm a residence in the winter, when the branches are bare. When summer heat arrives, their leaves provide a protective canopy.

Another essential element is seating. Picnic benches and cafe chairs have their place, especially when outdoor meals are served. But you won't sit quietly and contemplate the songbirds, butterflies and floral displays unless you can settle into a chair or chaise designed for lounging.

"Look for outside versions of furniture you use inside," recommends Gilbert Asher.

Also pay attention to what you hear. Bubbling, spilling, trickling or splashing water from a fountain, pool or stream is like a balm for tired spirits. The pleasant noise acts as a buffer between you and the cars, neighbors and lawn mowers of the outside world. Think of moving water as the sound track of your garden.

Finally, don't forget about the effect fragrance has on your mood. Incorporate a profusion of aromatic herbs and scented blooms—such as winter daphne, witch hazel, sweet peas and lilies—near your chosen seating area. This is a great way to celebrate a favorite fragrance.

Express yourself

The best outdoor living spaces are as individual as your interior rooms, and equally as effective at reflecting your personality. Creating a great garden requires part artistry, part green thumb. Just as you periodically repaint your bedroom walls or change the slipcover on your couch, use these tips to help keep the scenery in your outdoor spaces fresh. ▲

Debra Prinzing is a Southern California-based lifestyle writer and publisher of www.shedstyle.com.



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