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Gardens flourish on the Bench

Morris Hill neighbors take you to the heart of their gardens

By Bethann Stewart - Treasure Magazine

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Gardens often express greater individuality than clothes. While the office may not be ready for a radical combination of chartreuse, red and violet, the backyard sure is. Within every garden lies something of special significance for the gardener.

This season, residents of the Morris Hill neighborhood on the Boise Bench have opened their garden gates to share a glimpse of their gems with Treasure readers.

FRED ORCUTT, NORTH VINSON STREET

Orcutt bought a former rental home and the original backyard was a railroad right-of-way. He wanted the garden to be universally appealing, and he wanted to build it himself.

"I've just been one of those people who is not hesitant to do manual labor," he said. "It makes me feel physically good."

He took an engineer's approach to designing the garden, choosing plants for utility rather than looks. For example, Orcutt hates irises, but he planted them anyway because they make a great border and choke out weeds so he had less to mow.

He built his own deck and pergola. Orcutt also created his backyard sanctuary for very little money.

TIP: "For \$20, I got a beautiful backyard. You can take one day lily and turn it into a forest. In the spring, instead of cutting my lilacs, I tear them out, put them in water and in 60 days, I have another lilac. I didn't have to buy it. I have no problem with people who do, but I get a great deal of satisfaction out of doing it myself," Orcutt said.

JOHN AND JONEEN WARD, GARDEN STREET

The Wards used to live in New Mexico, where they fell in love with the local cuisine. When they moved to Boise, they would make runs to the border for green chili peppers, until they decided to grow their own.

"Now we order our chili seeds from New Mexico, and my husband starts them in his office," said Joneen.

They also built their pond by hand.

TIP: "Anything you want to do is easy; you just have to want to do it. If I want to do something, I just read up on it and do it," Joneen said.

RICH AND MEL RANDOLPH, NORTH ARCHER STREET

Rich Randolph's hops trellis flies about 14 feet in the air, carrying three different varieties: Mount Hood, Cascade, and one he calls Granddaddy, which may come from Atlanta, but no one's sure.

Randolph started brewing beer in 2007 under the name Boise Bench Brewers.

"This thing will go crazy. You want them to go over the top (of the trellis)," he said. "I get privacy out of the bedroom because the hops are covering the window."

TIP: "Hops are very invasive," Randolph said. Just like grapes (left), hops (right) "need southern exposure and a good trellis."

HELEN SHEPHERD, FAIRMONT STREET

A botanist by training, Shepherd's goal is to reduce her water use. About two years ago she put in an iris bed to cut down on water and reduce the area she had to mow.

"The irises range from pure white to black. My mother was given the blacks by a friend," she said. "Pretty soon my whole yard will be iris."

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TIP: "After we moved here, I went to garden club sales in the spring. It's a good way to learn about plants," Hickman said.

WENDY AND TANNER BERKSON, CLINTON STREET

It was the meticulous landscaping that sold the Berksons on their house. When they arrived, the people they bought the house from had left behind a statue of St. Francis of Assisi in the backyard against a backdrop of lush green ivy. The Berksons decided to keep it.

"We just liked it so much where it was," Wendy said. "We thought it was a nice touch to symbolize the protection of our backyard. He's in the shade all day, but in the morning he gets a brilliant glow."

Last summer, Tanner decided he wanted a waterfall. The Berksons tried all sorts of ways to get it working, but they couldn't get the water moving.

"We tried to make our own pump, but it didn't work," Wendy said. "We spent more money making a pump than we did buying one."

The Berksons put four koi in the pond. This year, they were surprised by some new additions - at least 10 baby koi.

"We were both thinking, how did they get there? We didn't mean to do that," Wendy said.

TIP: "Research what to expect about having a pond. We didn't do that. If you're going to do it, try not to do it as cheaply as possible because it won't happen," Wendy said.

FRANK AND KRISTIN YOUNG, NORTH GARDEN STREET

The Youngs have had a vegetable garden for seven years.

Instead of buying a lot of produce from the store, they researched the kind of garden they would need to feed a family of four and built the first one in the front yard. When the trees grew to shade it, Frank moved the whole garden to the backyard.

"The sun hits it perfectly," he said. "Being raised here in Idaho, we've always had a big garden."

Their two daughters, ages 5 and 9, love it, he said.

The Youngs save the seeds from all of their plants and grow many of their own starts in a mini-greenhouse.

TIP: "We compost everything and mix it in with the soil every year," said Frank. "You just have to keep at it."

CORY AND PRESTON ROGERS, DENTON STREET

When the Rogerses moved into their home almost five years ago, it was a vacant lot with a 100-year-old house on it. A couple of things came up when they began watering that they didn't know were there. "We have about 20 peonies," she said. "A year after we moved in we just got these beautiful fragrant flowers. They are so dear É I just imagine the original owner planted them."

Cory took the master gardening class through the University of Idaho Extension in Ada County. One of the elements she designed was a "Q" garden. They tilled the area, found the pavers online and shaped a little patio out of them to look like the letter Q. They seeded the area with grass, which filled in after a season, creating a quiet sitting area.

"We like to think of our yard as a small-scale of the world-famous royal Kew Gardens," Cory said.

TIP: Cory Rogers recommends the master gardener program. "If you're starting with a vacant lot, it helps with planning and design, flower research, sun and water," she said.

Bethann Stewart covers Boise neighborhoods, the school district and city government for the Idaho Statesman. Her family had a farm in Massachusetts for nearly a century, but she discovered the joys of container gardening on fire escapes in New York City.