

Imagination can turn a little plot into garden lot

By Ronni Ross
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Longing to have a little patch of paradise all your own?

With some careful planning and a bit of imagination, even those with small apartment or condo patios can have lush little havens in which to enjoy nature's bounty.

The first step in creating a small-space garden is to outline the hardscape, which generally includes the patio surface area, according to Willy Bear, of Sperling Nursery in Calabasas. Hardscape can constitute cobblestone, cement, bricks, wood decking, stepping stones or any other material used on patios, she said, adding that the perimeter of a hardscape area is usually lined with some type of border, such as a raised planter bed.

"The guidelines are dictated by the size and shape of the area," said Bear, who received certification from the Ecole de Jardin in France and who traveled in England studying gardens. She added that planting a garden can increase privacy.

Bear, who gives tours and lectures to gardening club and school groups at Sperling, recommends making a rough sketch of the garden area, noting how much sun exposure each part gets, then deciding which plants will work best and are most desired.

Once a gardener has decided which plants will grow well, the next step is to amend the soil to accommodate each type of plant, Bear said, adding that some plants need more acidity than others.

SMALL-SPACE GARDENING

Here are recommendations on what to plant and where to plant it when creating a small garden:

SHADY AREAS: Mondo grass, clivia, beregenia, New Guinea impatiens, standard impatiens, ferns, azaleas, begonias, lirope, sweet violets, baby tears.

SUNNY AREAS: Bougainvillea, hibiscus, herbs, vegetables (especially tomatoes), extra-dwarf citrus trees.

SHRUBS TO COMBINE FOR AN ALL-SEASON GARDEN: Candy tuft, statice, Chinese forget-me-nots, star parade, pink breath of heaven, Japanese maple, ornamental grasses, cat mint, snapdragons, geraniums (all need sun, and most can be planted in containers).

PLANTS THAT LIKE CONTAINERS: Strawberries, herbs, carrots, beets, peppers, eggplants, alyssum, lobelia, johnny-jump-ups, blue fescue grass, marigolds, day lilies, gladiolus, begonias, mayten or carrot wood trees, azaleas.

SOURCES: Willy Bear, Sperling Nursery, Calabasas; Steven M. Cohan, director, Descanso Gardens, La Canada-Flintridge.

ainers may be needed.

"Search for planters in styles that will match your patio style," he said.

The benefits of container gardening, according to Cohan, are that the plants can be changed from season to season if desired, and the planters can be used decoratively.

To personalize a garden, Steven M. Cohan, director of Descanso Gardens in La Canada-Flint-ridge, suggests accents such as small water sculptures, arbors, birdhouses and stationary or hanging planters.

"Water sculptures, even very small ones, can really be nice. The sound of water creates serenity," he said. "Small water-feature pumps are very easy to hook up and are available at home and garden centers. There are lots of landscape books that give ideas on how to set it up."

A new concept in water features is fiberglass waterfalls, according to Cohan. "The fake rock is much lighter to carry, and you can scale them down for a patio," he said.

Another technique Cohan suggests is stacking, stair-stepping or tiering concrete containers. The type he recommends, dubbed "Loffel Yardstone" by the manufacturers, is available at home improvement centers for about \$5 per unit and can be overlapped to create a variety of effects.

The units, which can be recessed into a mound of dirt or layered and then built up to any height, "can create a multidimensional landscape," said Cohan, adding that when used together, the containers produce many nooks in which to plant. In a display at Descanso, the earth-toned containers, which weigh about 65 pounds each when filled with soil, were stacked in a way to create an enclosed sitting area out of a site that previously had been flat, according to Cohan.

"You can also create a mini garden by stacking natural rock. It changes the topography," he said, adding that plants can be recessed into the soil while still in a container to make them easier to move.

When attempting to elevate the landscape or add another dimension to the garden, Cohan suggests using arbors, hanging baskets and birdhouses.

"Arbors are very nice. They aren't very big, and you can train wisteria, grapevines or jasmine (to grow) over it," he said.

When selecting planters, he suggests redwood or terra-cotta varieties and terra-cotta-colored plastic pots, which, he said, can "look as nice and last longer." For larger plants or trees, wine barrel con-

"Plant taller plants in larger pots in the back and smaller ones in front. It's a nice effect."

Bear also believes that for extremely small gardens or patios with no dirt areas, container gardening is the best bet. Among the plants that thrive in pots, she said, are annuals, small flowering shrubs, perennials and small trees that don't have invasive root systems. "Azaleas do well in pots," she added.

"When using containers, make sure there is sufficient drainage and make sure good potting soil is used," she said, noting that pots should have drainage holes in the bottom. Plants in pots also need to be fed more than those in the ground, she said.

Once the garden design has been decided upon and the plants have been purchased, Bear recommends laying them out near where they will be planted to get an idea of how everything will look together.

"Then you do your planting, plug in the fountain and sit back with your iced tea," she said with laugh.

Early spring to late spring is the best time to plant, with fall being the second-best time, according to Bear, whose small townhome patio garden has a cobblestone hardscape and fountain in one corner. Winter and summer are not good planting seasons, she said, although annuals can be planted during the winter.

As a finishing touch to any garden, Bear suggests installing low-voltage lighting to provide nighttime accents.

When the garden is complete, caring for it isn't a huge chore, according to the experts.

"Once everything is in, every three weeks (during growing season) plants should be given a water-soluble fertilizer," said Bear.

"There aren't irrigation systems built into condos, so it's up to us to be diligent with hand watering or to build our own irrigation system," she added. Bear also cautions against planting larger trees with invasive roots that might cause damage to a neighbor's property.

In the cold months, she said keeping the garden free of pests and weeded, pruning roses and planting annuals are all that's required to keep your little patch of paradise healthy.