

HOMES&GARDEN

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Turn your garden and kitchen waste into black gold

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BONNIE BORUCKI/COURTESY

With its pond and bio-bog, the backyard becomes a vacation destination every night for Meredith Florian and Merry Luskin of Oakland. The water feature improves wildlife habitat, and on the berm by the pond is a raised vegetable bed. Below left, the meditation path, which leads to the meditation room, below right, that is watched over by St. Francis.

Home, home in the yard

By Jillian Steinberger
Correspondent

WHILE many of us get into a rut, spending most of our lives indoors at the desk, behind a computer, or in front of a TV, "California living" always has meant spending time in the backyard with family and friends.

That is also how the rest of the nation pictures us — out in the backyard, tipping back a cold one, lighting up the barbecue.

That image of California life is now an increasing trend in ecological garden design. Designers, landscapers and homeowners are pushing to create gardens where people actually want to live, to take ownership of their own personal green space and to blur the line between what's outside and what's in.

In this age of McMansions, many people

wish their homes were larger. Yet, many of us already have extra living space. Just outside the backdoor, there may well be a couple or a few thousand lonely square feet just waiting to be moved into.

Just like we instinctively assign specific uses to each room in our homes, creating places for dining, sleeping, playing and socializing, most gardens naturally include a range of spaces with specific purposes, whether or not they are landscaped as such. We typically do not think of these spaces as "rooms," yet that is what they effectively are even if they don't have walls.

Creating outdoor rooms can bring a sense of harmony and flow. And to accomplish this, it is entirely possible to go in with tractors and forklifts, move soil around and lay large concrete slabs to define space. But many

Design for fine living includes your outdoor space

Structuring space

Instead of building a room with boards and drywall, try building your outdoor spaces with natural materials.

■ **GROUND COVERS:** Indoors, you might have wood floors with area rugs in your living room, linoleum in the kitchen, and carpet in the den. Take this idea to the backyard.

Choose materials with different textures or colors to define spaces, create aesthetic effects, and suit specific purposes.

Consider mulches, gravels, pebbles, and ground cover plants. You can also take advantage of oak leaf duff and pine needles — both make beautiful natural mulches. Pine needles are also nice to walk on.

■ **PATHS:** To break up large spaces into "rooms," create paths with rocks, gravel and sand. Using moss rocks to line the path creates a strong visual barrier.

■ **CONTOURS:** Perfectly flat backyards can become lush with curves using mulch, which also stamps out weeds. To create soft contours or "hills," use mulch to create a mound. Just rake it into a shape you like, or lay 8 inches over fill soil.

■ **PLANTS FOR WALLS:** Use hedges or border plantings as walls. For example, to mark off the kitchen garden room from the rest of the yard, plant a colorful ornamental border using only edible plants and flowers.

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Yard

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of us aren't in the mood to invest the tens of thousands of dollars this type of installation requires.

And it's just as well — why pave paradise? With some thoughtful observation, a little ingenuity, and a small budget, you can uncover the natural structure of your yard and then "decorate" it to create a lovely, if rustic, space that enhances and responds to your life and that of your family's.

And if one day you do want to invest in a formal, permanent hardscape, you can. The softscapes are flexible. Natural materials — generally easy to tote — are used to separate contiguous areas and create structure. Hence, these landscapes easily change with your life's priorities, without the expense or disruption of demolition. You just move the rocks — well, maybe boulders — out of the way and let the Bobcats in.

However, you may be so thrilled with your softscape landscape that no matter your means now or in the future, you will love your yard as it develops over the years, so much so that you will spend more of your life outside, enjoying our famous, fabulous, Northern California terrain.

Getting started

A garden designer or consultant can help interpret the natural features of your landscape, brainstorm your ideal uses for it, and figure out how to get there. But softscapes are a great option for do-it-yourselfers.

First, ask yourself how you would like to use the space. What is most important to you: Relaxing? Al fresco dining? Entertaining? Can you see hosting cocktail parties or Fourth of July celebrations? What about growing food? Do you want to take your yoga or meditation practice outside? How about an outdoor office? Think about it.

Next, a little observation can help you assess your site:

- Are there any large, immovable features? These might include existing hardscape, hillsides, boulders,

If you're lucky, maybe there is that big native oak creating a "room" for quiet contemplation or romance.

large trees, shrubs and hedges. Possibly there's an outbuilding. Some Bay Area gardens even have daylighted creeks running through them. Dry creek beds are common.

- What are the current softscape elements? Where are garden beds, lawns, and other plantings?
- What are the climatic conditions, including sun exposure? When it rains, can you see any drainage patterns where water is pooling?
- Are there natural proximities? For example, perhaps there is a flat spot convenient to the kitchen door that perfectly fits your outdoor dining table and chairs. Or, maybe you desire a private spot for contemplation, and it just so happens that there is a native oak with room for a bench and a birdbath.

The natural features you observe, together with your lifestyle goals, should determine the development of your landscape. So, whatever you've got, take note.

Maybe nothing is there but unused space. Perhaps you've stood forlornly, looking out the window at a big, flat, rectangular weed patch, with a "lawn" that is really just Bermuda grass, dandelion and oxalis. You are not alone.

Many people have a rectangle of patchy lawn with a table and chairs next to a barbecue. Unglorified though it may be, this is effectively your outdoor "dining room." And, most likely, it is convenient to the kitchen door.

If you're lucky, maybe there is that big native oak creating a "room" for quiet contemplation or romance. If there is a raised platform, you just may have yourself a yoga room.

If your kids enjoy sleeping outdoors on camping trips, you might create a "camp-

Space

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During the warm months, this might mean pole beans climbing up a "wall" of corn or sunflowers, with a short, pretty row of marigolds up front.

In the cool months, you might interplant broccoli or brussels sprouts, which have beautiful yellow flowers that attract bees. Or try graceful, willowy, white-flowering arugula, and gorgeous red-leaf mustard greens (try "Red Giant").

- **LOGS AND BRANCHES:** Before dragging that tree trunk to the landfill, ask yourself if there is anywhere you can use it in your garden. A log might provide seating around a firepit. It can be placed in the landscape for a forest floor effect.

Logs and branches can also be used to line paths and build raised beds.

Tip: Many tree care companies will drop off wood chips for free at your home. Just call around and ask. You'll be doing them a favor. Also, most local water agencies offer sizable rebates on mulch, so check with them, too.

Reuse and recycle

- Scour garage sales for garden furniture such as Adirondack and wrought iron chairs, and structural features such as metal arches. You can plant veining edibles — grapes, peas, beans and even cucumbers — on them, or ornamentals such as a climbing rose.

ing" area on that yoga platform. Or, if you're the one who likes sleeping outside, you could create a bedroom for yourself, using a hedge or shrubs to screen the area off and create privacy. You can even decorate it, just as you would indoors, but with garden art.

If you enjoy gardening, you probably have an area where half-filled bags of potting soil pile up along with stakes, old pots and other supplies.



BONNIE BORUCKI/COURTESY

Merry Luskin and Meredith Florian sit in a "pocket park" to bird-watch. The cozy nook is visually defined by its use of diminutive plant species, colorful toys and figurines, and a child-size bench.

A friend spent \$8 for three used metal arches. Planted, they create a lush, welcoming outdoor foyer to her garden.

- Look around your property for odds and ends that might be decorative or structural. Are there old pavers, steppingstones or flagstone? Rocks or boulders lying around in a pile? Chimes and garden art gathering dust in a box? Statuary, old teapots, antique chicken wire or fencing? They are now your craft materials and art supplies.

Bay-friendly approach

- **Permeability.** By avoiding concrete, most of your yard will be permeable. This means rainwater percolates down into the soil where it belongs, instead of puddling on your property or running off into the storm drains, where it carries pollutants such as car oil and pesticides into the Bay.
- **Create and protect wildlife habitat:** There are a lot more worms under mulch

than concrete. The worms and other organisms improve the soil and attract birds and other pollinators — in turn, giving you more flowers and fruit.

- **Save your soil:** Without the Bobcats and other heavy machinery used in hardscape installation, you avoid compacting the soil. With good soil, you can have beautiful, thriving plants without using chemical products like pesticides and fertilizers.
- **Less to the landfill:** If you reuse and recycle items from your own property or from thrift shops and garage sales, you give new life to them while also keeping them out of the landfill.
- **Conserve energy:** Natural ground covers moderate soil temperatures, helping to prevent the heat island effect. Your property may stay cooler in summer without the glare that shines off concrete surfaces.
- **For more information,** on Bay-friendly gardening, go to www.bayfriendly.org.

This may be the area where you transplant seedlings and work your compost. If you clean and organize it, this effectively becomes your own home nursery, a garden room that nurtures all others.

Say you have a handful of fruit trees planted near each other. Guess what? You've got your own personal orchard. And, if you have a pond, you also have the makings of an oasis.

So pull up an Adirondack chair, kick back, breathe deep, take in the scenery, and look at your kingdom. Or queendom, as it may be.

Enjoy, and let your imagination be your guide.

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