

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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NW Gardens: Essential fixes

Creative solutions to the necessary evils -- recycling bins, garbage cans and dog runs

Last updated October 18, 2007 5:05 p.m. PT

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SPECIAL TO THE P-I

Growing pretty plants is one thing, but when it comes to dealing with the functional parts of our gardens, real creativity is needed.

You want Rover to be happy and the garbage and recycling bins easy to roll out, yet you'd like the garden to look great, too. Can the necessary parts of our gardens be both functional and beautiful?

Clever designers who see solutions to the problems in our garden spaces meet those challenges.

As our garbage bins shrink, the recycling and yard/food waste bins grow with paper, glass, wilted lettuce. We need easy access to the bins -- appropriately called "wheelie bins" in England -- and an easy path to the street or alley where the stuff is collected. But, even though the plastic bins are green, they aren't the most attractive pieces of garden fixture.

Tim and Katherine King, owners of Land2c Landscape Design, dealt with the bin reality in their Queen Anne garden by hiding them completely, yet keeping them in the easiest possible place to use.

Tim King redesigned the back porch, which was formerly a small affair useful for foot traffic only. With additional space and bench seating along two sides, the porch invites guests to relax and offers a raised view of the back garden.

Under the cushions and unbeknownst to guests, every inch of space is used. One bench contains a storage area under the seat, while the other -- next to the side gate -- disguises top access to the bins. Step out the back door, lift the lid and dump the recycling.

Below, and level with the gate to the front, doors open wide to allow the bins to be hauled out. The only steps involved are those in front that lead to street level.

For alley collection sites, garden designer Octavia Chambliss designs a corral for the bins that is tucked into the back garden. Matching the style of the corral to the fence creates a seamless look. A spacious size -- 7 feet long -- makes it easy to move bins in and out.

Useful, durable and compact quarter-minus crushed rock makes up the floor of the containment area. Quarter minus includes one-quarter-inch size down to dust (also called fines); the pieces are angular, not round like pea gravel, and pack down well.

Chambliss also uses quarter-minus rock as the floor of dog runs she designs. She sites the runs along a non-traffic side of the house, which keeps bark alerts to a minimum.

Designing for dogs is a world unto itself. When done well, dogs and homeowners live together happily, each enjoying the garden in their own way.

Guy Feldman, project manager for Classic Nursery & Landscape Co., designed a garden for some clients and their two

dogs by building a run alongside the house.

River rocks and flagstone in the dog run make cleanup easy, but the material is also a design element that ties into the back garden, which is terraced using similar stone.

The paths that run throughout the terraced back aren't noticeable from the patio, but the dogs -- one large, one small -- know their way well.

It's often the discreet design that saves the day. Landscape architect Alan Burke, also with Classic Nursery, employed rocks in raised beds and the patio -- and lots of containers in a landscape built for people and two Labrador retrievers.

The dogs romp but do not damage the sturdy landscape. Plants in tall containers are out of harm's way. The stone patio is easy to clean.

Allowing for dog traffic led designer Susie Thompson to build a barked path suited to both canines and humans.

The client's property is steeply sloped on the sides and flat in back. Beyond the fenced property line in back grows a pleasingly green natural area. Thompson needed a design to accommodate all members of the family, which includes two German shepherds.

Thompson extended the deck off the back of the house and connected it to a patio at the same level. Unseen, until you are upon it or in it, is the dog run, which follows the line of the patio. Thompson dropped the run 3 feet below the patio surface, and from the deck it looks as if the property is flat all the way to the fence.

Thompson's dog run is reminiscent of an English ha-ha -- that unseen ditch that separates the people and garden from the cows and meadow. Because you don't notice the depression in the ground until you come upon it ("ha-ha!" you say in surprise), the landscape appears as one continuous piece, and you are a part of the nature beyond.

On a more modest scale is the problem of downspouts. They look best when they are unseen, but there are occasions when a roofline ends away from the house and something needs to be done with the runoff.

Copper rain chains are a classy alternative. Chambliss' own garden has one, channeling the water from a 4-inch-wide copper gutter down to an urn set in river rocks. When the urn overflows, a drainage pipe carries away the water.

Both functional and beautiful, this setup is a seasonal water feature, offering ornament down to the smooth rocks that turn dark and shiny when wet.

King took another tack with the downspout at his own house, and in doing so solved the problem of privacy for the back garden, too. At the corner of the house, where back garden becomes side path, he built a roof extension with matching architectural detail.

Runoff from the roof now flows over this small second roof, then down the spout on the other side of the gate.

The gate, however, is more than just a gate: it's a door -- a Dutch door. The blue door implies privacy, but neighborliness is acknowledged, because the top of the door is multipaned, allowing visual if not physical access.

The bins are hidden right next to the blue door, making it a straight shot out to the street. Several problems solved with beautiful results.

The designers

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