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NW Gardens: It's an endless variety show on the patio

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SPECIAL TO THE P-I

Some people choose patio gardens; others have patio gardens thrust upon them. Regardless of whether you are looking to limit your garden space or find that the only garden space you have is limited, you can have a landscape full of interest.

Stacie Crooks' Innis Arden home has loads of garden space, but large expanses of lawn didn't fit into her idea of a good garden. So she designed a landscape that suited her low-maintenance, sustainable ideas -- practices that she teaches in classes through Seattle Public Utilities.

Crooks' choice of plants is made deliberately for easy care -- a couple of big cleanup days a year, plus cutting back after the spring flush. That about wraps up the entire garden, patio included.

When Crooks and her husband moved into their 1950s house about 10 years ago, the large lawn sloped downward toward the house. Crooks leveled off the slope right outside the house, so that the patio is accessible straight out the back door, with no steps involved.

The patio is a study in form meets function. Crooks wanted an area where her two boys could play as they grew up and that she and her husband could use as an outdoor living space for entertaining. Those functions are enhanced by the year-round plantings in pots and in the ground.

Creating a level space gave the patio an instant garden area around the edge, because of the grade change. This gently sloping bed surrounds the curving line of the patio.

Running along the top edge, almost unnoticeable, is a strip of single pavers that marks the place where Crooks and her husband installed a French drain to prevent water from pouring onto the patio surface.

The patio surface itself is made up of large slabs of concrete that are divided by rows of brick. Concrete is inexpensive and durable, and Crooks chose a construction grade (three-eighths aggregate) that wouldn't stain.


"I wanted it to look like an old sidewalk," she says, "like it had been rained on for 30 years. And I wanted a surface where it wouldn't matter if the boys dropped Popsicles."

The patio is divided into distinct sun and shade areas. That happens often when our houses, neighboring houses or apartment buildings block the sun.

The Crooks built an extension onto their house. The extension, on the south side of the patio, casts shade for most of the day except in high summer. Stacie Crooks took the idea of a shady container garden and ran with it.

Three clusters of pots show off the texture and color effects of foliage using a repeating theme of Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola'). In addition to the grass, which provides a soft, shaggy texture and bright yellow variegated leaves, several different cultivars of coral bells (*Heuchera*) show up again and again.



 Andrew Buchanan /

Clusters of pots along the shady side of the patio hold shade-tolerant shrubs and perennials.

The green-and-pewter netted leaves of 'Green Spice,' apricot tones of 'Marmalade' and deep purples of 'Obsidian' -- all *Heuchera* varieties -- repeat leaf forms just as the grass repeats color. It's a way of tying the entire potted shade garden together.

Variegated, colorful foliage is a favorite of Crooks, who especially likes to see something bright in the garden in winter. It's a theme she carries out on the sunny side of the patio, too.

In the sloped bed alongside the patio, *Osmanthus heterophyllus* 'Goshiki,' with creamy splashed leaves, *Euonymus fortunei* 'Emerald Gaiety,' with crisp white variegation, and an evergreen (but variegated) sedge, *Carex morrowii* 'Variegata,' give the winter garden structure and interest.

This is definitely a garden space of minimal work.

Small deadheading chores can always be made more pleasant. Crooks gets to work in July, once the pink blooms have faded from the bright golden-leaved *Spiraea japonica* 'Magic Carpet' at the edge of the patio.

"It's so easy to stand there with a glass of wine and pinch off blooms with my other hand," she says. "I call it cocktail pruning."

Other easy-care techniques help to reduce the amount of water used on the garden. The pots have no irrigation system, and Crooks waters them only when they need it. Large pots retain moisture longer, and water does not evaporate from glazed pots as quickly as it does from terra cotta.

The beds around the patio have an emitter irrigation system ready and waiting for use. But it isn't hooked up to a timer; instead, Crooks turns the system on when it's necessary.

On the hot, sunny side of the patio, groups of small pots show off Crooks' one indulgence in the annual department. "I don't buy tulips every year, and I don't buy geraniums," she says. "Echeverias are my little treasures."

Echeverias are fabulous succulents that grow in gray or gray-green rosettes; many kinds have wavy leaf edges that are tinted red. They look eerily like underwater plants. To say that they are hardy to our USDA Zone 8 is pushing it. "They turn to goo in winter," Crooks says, "and next year I buy more."

She plants the echeverias with sedums and heathers. The echeverias may turn to goo, and some sedums die back, but the heathers abide, providing winter color.

The right choices in plants, materials and design mean that the garden is more enjoyable, and less work. Crooks shows that patios don't give you fewer gardening opportunities, but instead offer more chances to create year-round beauty.

French drains

French drains help solve the problem of "negative drainage" -- that's when the ground slopes toward your house, bringing groundwater with it. Water that pools around the house can damage the foundation and fill your basement when it rains.

To draw water away from the house, a trench is dug and filled with gravel and a perforated pipe. The water that drains into the trench is carried away to a safer place -- to the sides of the house, but not directed at your neighbor's -- so that it isn't in line to create more problems.

The trench needs to change grade -- get deeper -- in order to draw water away. The trench can be lined with landscape fabric to keep the gravel and pipe free-flowing.



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Potted succulents thrive in a sunny spot on the patio steps.

Installing a French drain usually means digging up the yard, but it will give you the opportunity to recreate a garden that doesn't include standing water in winter.

Homeowners with little or no experience may want to hire a competent contractor for the job. Get a recommendation from a garden designer or organization listed in my article on how to hire help (goto.seattlepi.com/328643).

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