

▲ What was once a small patch of turf and a children's play structure is now an edible garden with raised beds.

the Evolving Garden

Changing the function of your landscape to make it the best it can be

Story and photos by Garry Menendez, ASLA

Have you ever remodeled a room in your home because its current appearance and function no longer fit your lifestyle? Perhaps you've converted a no-longer-used bedroom into a home office or transformed a basement room into a home theater or rec room. When it comes to our

gardens, many seem to be more reluctant to radically alter their appearance aside from changing a few plants here and there.

The fact is that as we and our families grow older, our outdoor environment should evolve to suit our current needs. I'm not talking about ripping out a ragged

azalea in favor of a better plant. I've always considered plantings to be icing on the cake when it comes to garden design. My focus in the article will be about changing the overall function of a piece of your landscape or garden including circulation, structures and vegetation.

IT ALL BEGINS WITH A PLAN

Mine is not a large backyard but there is a lot happening in 2200 square feet. There is the recirculating pond, brick patio complete with baseball stadium seats, grill area (gas and charcoal of course), hammock, perennial border, privacy fence with its multitude of "decor," brick walkway and play structure. It is the latter element that inspired a major change in our garden. I designed and constructed the cedar fort-like funhouse when our kids were very small. Now my two daughters are 16 and 12 years old and getting a little "mature" to sleep out in the fort or fly down the slide.

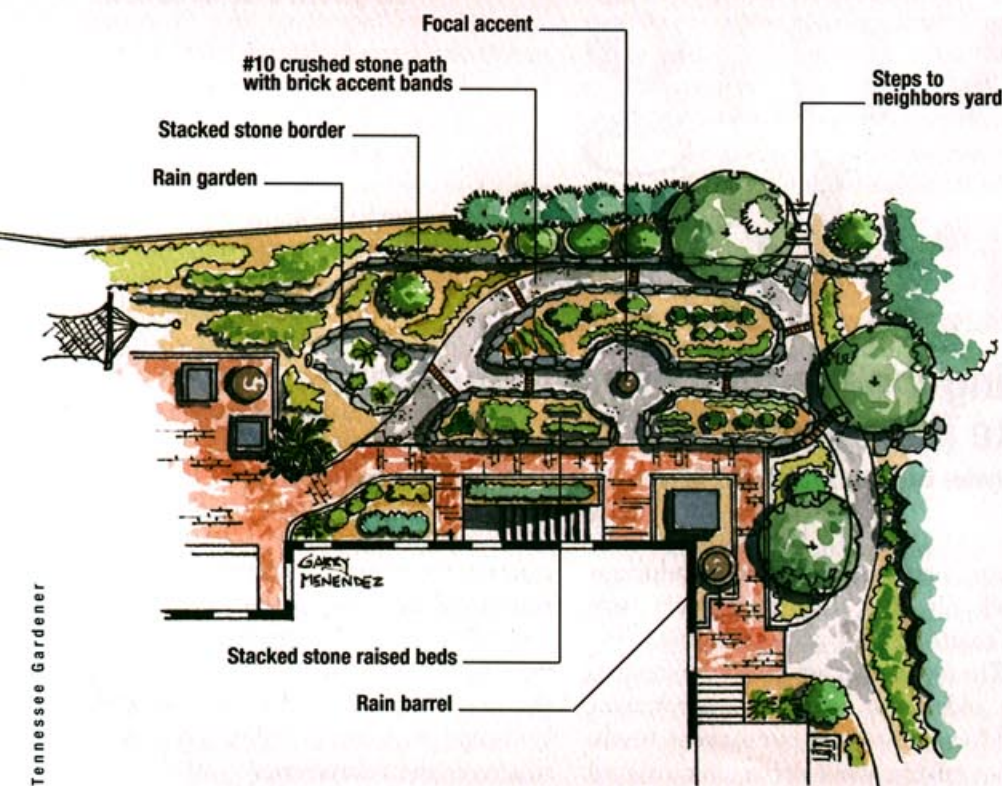
Last winter I read a great book entitled *Animal Vegetable Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver. While I'm not exactly off the grid with regard to sustainability as the author experienced with her family for a full year, her writing inspired me to make better use of the little space I have. I decided the play structure had to go and in its place would be raised vegetable gardens with all the necessary pathways and funky accents. An additional feature which came about as a result of working with an existing rain gutter outflow pipe was a small rain garden on one end of the new design and a rain barrel collection system on the opposite side.

As a landscape architect, I'm a big believer in planning and design before you turn over the first shovel of soil. Since this project was so close to home I'll confess that my main design tools were a can of marking paint, a tape measure, some stakes and string. The illustrated design you see was created afterward for this article.

FINDING HOMES FOR REUSABLE THINGS

My biggest dilemma during the early implementation stage was what to do with the play structure. I'm a sentimentalist and am having a hard enough time coping with a daughter who is beginning to drive, so in my mind, completely trashing the fort was not an option. Fortunately our very good friends and neighbors immediately behind us have a 2 year old boy who is now the proud new owner of a slightly remodeled play structure so everyone is happy.

If you should ever find yourself in a similar garden remodeling situation, I urge you to recycle whatever you can. Too often we take the easy way out and simply bring our junk to the curb to be gathered by the trash truck or haul it to the landfill ourselves. Remember, "One man's trash is another's treasure".





▲ Crushed stone paths make moving about this small vegetable garden a breeze with little maintenance.

Inset: The transformation in progress as old cross-ties are being removed.

◀ Before and After: Within two months of completion the garden is starting to produce. Note the whimsical industrial roof turbine as the one of a kind centerpiece.

BRINGING IN NEW MATERIALS

For my project I wanted to use a material for the raised beds that could conform to the crazy shapes we landscape architects concoct and I wanted it to be permanent (because I don't really want to do this again in 10 years). Therefore I opted to use stack stone for the edges. My backyard is pretty landlocked so this meant a lot of trips with the trusty wheelbarrow for yours truly. Six tons of stack stone, five tons of topsoil, sand and compost and three tons of #10 crushed stone later, I had nearly everything I needed to keep myself busy for a few hours.

There was a little planning ahead needed as I constructed the rain garden. I wasn't very keen on the idea of my crushed stone paths being washed out should the rain garden ever fill to capacity. To prevent this I ran an overflow pipe under the main path where it now empties out near the base of a water tolerant fern (again, everyone's happy). I also retro-fitted my existing irrigation system and low voltage lighting to enhance this new garden addition.

The completed garden showing how much planting can take place in a relatively small space. ▼

Adjustment of the brick walkway and demolition. The play structure starts to migrate to neighbors' yard. ►

Top: An early photo of the garden as place to play for the kids.





◀ An old oak whiskey barrel makes collecting precious rain water easy and attractive.

Roof downspouts converge to empty into the rain garden in progress. ▼

Bottom: Using river rocks and plants that can take floods and drought (iris, canna lily, cardinal flower, sweet flag) the finished rain garden is put to the test.

ENJOYING THE FRUITS (AND VEGETABLES) OF YOUR LABOR

The last step was to add the plants, oh boy! Again, 300 square feet of raised beds isn't all that much if you're planning on providing sustenance for you and possibly a few neighbors so every square inch has to count. Currently there are potatoes, tomatoes, sunflowers, soybeans, strawberries, lettuce, peppers and nasturtiums elbowing each other for light and water. Mind you, there isn't a lot of any of the above. There's just enough for my family to check the progress daily (when the computer or TV has us bug-eyed) and eagerly await some mini-harvests.

The point is we have taken a portion of our yard which no longer served much purpose other than mowing a little patch of it every so often and transformed it into a beautiful and functional part of the complete landscape. We'll hopefully learn from our over-planting mistakes and may scream a few obscenities from the window in the den as the squirrels make some early morning raids but it will definitely be worth it. So look around your yard and ask yourself this question, "Is this the best this could be?" If not, it may be time to evolve. 🐿

Happy Planting!

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