

Team Gardening: Efficient Work & Shared Passion

by Laura Demme



IT STARTED WHILE STANDING AT THE BUS STOP, talking with my neighbors with little kids yelling and running around—a conversation about gardening. And we were off, exchanging advice and details of our experience in our own gardens.

I had recently moved to the area, which encompassed a neighborhood of International Style homes (influenced by the 1930s Bauhaus movement in Europe) built in the late '40s and early '50s for returning GIs. The houses are a low cost, innovative type of housing with very little extra room, very economically designed. The outdoors became extra living space!

The properties were planted in typical '50s style with azaleas, rhodies, and the ubiquitous dark and overgrown yew hedges. Long, straight privet hedges, meticulously barbered by my next-door neighbor, always at least six inches too short, and many other challenges of living in an older development require unique, site-specific solutions. However, the saving grace was the old shade trees with wide, curving streets, which made the general ambiance pleasant and cool.

The Gardeners Cooperative

My neighbor and I discussed plans for our own gardens and, after a few such conversations with LVA, I was invited to join a cooperative group of women she had recently started, gardening for two hours a

week in each others' gardens. Thinking this would be a great way to meet others with like interests, I agreed.

Twelve years later, we still meet once a week for twelve weeks in spring and twelve weeks in fall, the summer days being too hot for anyone to work on big projects in the garden, and our time complicated by kids, camps, and vacations.

We have transformed many gardens, weeded, edged, mulched, divided and shared perennials, transplanted shrubs, landscaped areas, built raised vegetable beds, established dry stream drainage, planted bulbs, pruned and maintained shrubs, and designed and built compost piles.

We have kept the group small, no more than six people at one time, to allow for two turns in each of our own gardens per season. Scheduling for a particular day per week, we remain flexible, as we have all changed

schedules periodically. The day could be different in any given season. The time is usually in the morning, earlier in the hotter months, later as the weather cools. Two hours allow for a certain amount of work to be accomplished without taking up an entire day. We have taken to providing water and an occasional nibble, but have determined not to turn it into a coffee break, unless arranged ahead of time for a discussion or a minor celebration. We save the eating for a luncheon a couple of times a year. Of course in midwinter we all yearn to be outside, meeting for lunch or dinner to discuss and consult about the upcoming season and all the new possibilities. In February, we have been doing a soup exchange, which is quite successful!

It takes a committed group of people who are willing to agree and commit to achieve anything like this. We allow for illness and emergencies, making up our missed time in a person's garden or agreeing for them to not work in your garden for that session.

The Kidney-shaped Garden

When I think of the time my own first project took! The goal was to unite the two Japanese maples in front of my house into a large kidney-shaped flower bed, eliminating the grass and creating a flowery oasis as a focal point for the front of our house. This took me two days to accomplish



A mixed front border, with variegated dogwood and daylilies in the background, under a cork tree. We had just finished working on the rocks and mulching the far border.

by myself with help from my husband. After ordering the topsoil and mulch and deciding on the shape with the help of a garden hose and spray paint, we dug and edged the outline, laying the clods upside down. Next we put down a layer of dried fall leaves about one foot deep. We covered this with six layers of overlapping newspaper sheets, wetting them as we went to avoid their blowing away in the breeze. The topsoil went on the newspaper and then a layer of mulch. By the following spring, the grass and newspaper had decomposed and I had a rich soft bed ready to plant.

It is now the loveliest tangle of a star magnolia, with winterberry, purple beautyberry, high-bush blueberry, and low growing hollies. Interspersed are echinacea, rudbeckia, sedum, and physostegia, along with a few annuals tucked here and there for high summer color.

The Driveway Garden

My favorite project with my new cooperative group was the transformation of my ugly, straight gravel driveway with grass on each side, which ended at an ugly carport. It is now a beckoning, gently curved path, paved with slates and river pebbles. We planned to build a patio with a pergola, which we did after pulling down the carport. The setting of the 24" slate pavers was done in advance. I ordered all the materials, the river pebbles, mulch, topsoil, and landscape

cloth in advance. We covered the grass with a thick layer of newspaper, laid out the lines for the curved path with spray paint. Next we laid the landscape cloth around the pavers and put on the river pebbles. We covered the newspaper with about 4" of topsoil and 2" of composted leaf mulch (free from our township mulch pit), and then gently sprinkled the mulched area with water.

This was accomplished in two hours! With six women! I allowed the soil and mulch to settle for about two weeks, then we planted an assortment of shrubs and perennials. I made use of the very well drained areas over the old gravel driveway, topped by topsoil and mulch, by planting sedums and herbs, such as thyme, strawberries, and lavender. In the larger areas, I planted oak-leaf hydrangeas, a small magnolia specimen (which one of our members gave me) with plans to add other types of shrubs as I found them in my travels. My neighbor had cut down several old shade trees, and my garden went from shady to sunny. I had three hawthorns planted to increase the shade and have been moving plants around to accommodate the new shade pattern.

I would never have considered this project and others on my own without the help of this wonderful group of women, now friends. As time goes on, members drop out and new ones are welcomed in. It helps to have a leader like LVA, whose dedication to the group and perseverance to keep it going has been the backbone by which we still stand.

We have developed many activities to do together other than gardening; visiting plant sales, donating our gardening skills and time to good causes in silent auctions, recipe exchanges (in the middle of



Another mixed front border, which the co-op has worked on over a few years, dividing and planting perennials. It includes a Japanese maple, star magnolia, abelia, Japanese anemone, hostas, tiarella, hardy begonia, hakonechloa, winterberry, and a piece of my concrete work, a birdbath.

winter), many wonderful meals, and field trips. Every few years, we may place a wholesale bulb order to refresh our bulb plantings. We donate plant material for fundraising in our district and to local churches. Occasionally, we will volunteer to work in a garden for a seriously ill or recently handicapped gardener.

I think I am still gardening because of the support of this group and their friendship. As we all age or come to new decisions about the amount of time and energy we have to put into our gardens, I feel sure that this group will continue to back me up and help make good gardening decisions!



Laura Demme is a sculptor and teacher in ceramics and concrete. Laura works as a part-time gardener and joined a garden coop about 12 years ago. She currently teaches clay handbuilding, raku firing, and concrete sculpture at Community Arts Center, Wallingford, PA and Wayne Art Center, Wayne, PA. Laura is a juried member in the Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen and the Potters Guild, Wallingford, PA. For more information go to web.me.com/laurademme.

Ed Note: The photos in this article are courtesy of Laura Demme. Clipart provided by www.freeclipartnow.com. For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG web site, www.hardyplant.org.



A view from the patio of the pathway the garden coop worked on. Plants include hawthorn tree, oakleaf hydrangea, cranesbill geranium, and a few potted herbs and annuals.

Classified Ads

The HPS/MAG Newsletter accepts garden-related classified ads. The cost is \$3 per line (approximately 40 characters or spaces per line), with a minimum of \$20 per ad. For more information, contact Barbara Bricks, 610-388-0428, bcubed32@aol.com.