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# Garden Rooms



# Landscaping a Small City Backyard

A retreat far from the madding crowd

by Christopher Cohan

**L**iving amid the asphalt, glass skyscrapers, limited open space and eight million people of New York City, I dreamed for years of having my own garden, a refuge from the noise, smells and constant activity of urban life. As a landscape architect, I was well aware of the challenges of city gardening. Backyards are small and often feel too public. For privacy they usually must be enclosed, but without encroaching on the limited space within. The garden design ought to be intimate and welcoming at the same time. Plants need to be carefully chosen and arranged to create the illusion of more space. And the garden should be designed for low maintenance—even enthusiastic gardeners like me never seem to have enough time.

Fortunately, you can fill a small garden with far fewer plants than a big garden needs, and see almost immediate results. Every detail of a city garden seems to offer special delight, perhaps because of the pleasing contrast with the hardness of the city all around it.

Four years ago, after a long and peaceful walk through Central Park, I returned to my small studio apartment in mid-town Manhattan, my lungs full of fresh air and my mind filled with images of natural splendor. I opened my window, only to be confronted by the boom of a commercial air conditioner, the smell of garlic from a restaurant below and an unobstructed view of solid brick buildings. I knew right then that I needed more green in my life.

My wife, Rita, and I embarked on a real estate search, finally settling on a low-rise brownstone garden apartment in the historic landmark district of Park Slope, Brooklyn. While the real estate salesperson apologized for the weedy, untended backyard and



An informal garden transforms the author's modest city backyard into a peaceful sanctuary. The garden, viewed from the roof, is composed of a diversity of colors, textures and shapes. Nearby trees, such as the trees-of-heaven (right), shelter and partially shade the garden.



A multitude of bulbs, including many 'Angelique' tulips, brightens the garden in the early spring.



The central patio is an inviting place for relaxing alone or for entertaining. Viewed from the edge of the patio nearest the living room door, a crabapple, tall shrubs and a barely-visible wood fence frame the garden, creating a backdrop for the woodland-like plantings beneath.

emphasized the amenities of the apartment, I gazed longingly into the sunny, airy yard and began mentally designing a garden. The way I saw it, I was about to purchase a garden that just happened to have an apartment attached to it.

I wanted my garden to be an outdoor room. During nice weather, we would open the large glass doors that lead to the backyard and make the garden an extension of the living room. I hoped to create a retreat where I could quietly relax by myself or occasionally entertain friends. In inclement weather, we would enjoy seeing the garden through windows—a major consideration was the view from the couch in winter.

### Evaluating the site

My garden, 25 ft. wide by 40 ft. long, is surrounded by mature plantings of trees and shrubs in the nearby yards. Along with a wood fence at the rear of the property, they provide a backdrop for the garden, creating the illusion that the garden encompasses a much larger space. The trees and shrubs also screen out most of the neighboring buildings, lending a sense of privacy to the space. Behind my yard is a white-flowering crabapple tree, 20 ft. high with an equal spread. Hanging gracefully over the wood fence, it is a glorious shower of white in the spring, and later drops its white, snowflake-like petals on the garden. On the eastern side of the garden are two large, sweet-smelling, rambling roses that clamber over a chain link fence, creating a partial screen. Their repeated explosions of hundreds of small, pink flowers, along with fresh, green foliage, delight the eye throughout the growing season. Several mature yews along the other side of the yard provide year-round greenery and a free-form enclosure.

The garden, which faces south, is sunny from late morning until mid-afternoon, when a nearby silver maple and several Lombardy poplars and trees-of-heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) cast a cool, dappled shade. Even more sun falls on the garden once the trees lose their leaves in fall.

### Designing and planting

Before I could design the garden, I had to clear debris. This was no small task, since I had to carry everything out of the garden through the apartment. I hauled away a mountain of unwanted stuff—everything from bricks and broken bottles to bicycle tires and waist-high weeds. Just beneath the soil surface, I struck piles of discarded electrical conduit and several pieces of cement, which required three weeks

of sledge-hammering to break into easily-removable pieces. I also found a treasure—several slabs of bluestone—enough to pave a small patio and a garden path.

Finally, a little more tired but no less excited, I was ready to make the garden. I chose a simple layout of beds surrounding a centrally-located patio. Between the bluestone slabs, I planted moss, crocus and grape hyacinth bulbs. Compared to a lawn, a paved patio is a much sturdier surface for entertaining and is practically maintenance-free. The patio invites visitors to enter the garden, provides easy access to the beds, gives the garden a focus and affords a close-up view of the plantings.

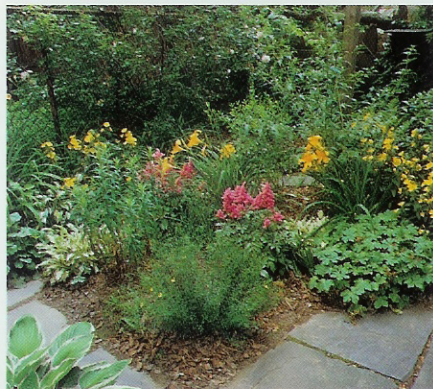
To keep a clear view year-round from the living room, I set low-growing plants near the doors and taller plants toward the rear of the garden. My main goal in choosing plants was to include a variety of colors, textures, shapes, fragrances and heights, though I avoided any that would look too tall or too large in a small garden. I especially like blue and white flowers and gray-leaved plants, but I didn't limit myself to them. Despite the wide range of plants, I was able to treat them all alike, amending the soil with peat moss, topsoil I saved from digging out the patio, and a balanced fertilizer.

Fragrant plants offer a pleasant welcome to the garden. A bluestone path from the door to the patio is lined with 'Hidcote' lavender, a cultivar with wonderfully fragrant deep-blue flowers. Beneath it grows lemon thyme (*Thymus citriodorus*), which creeps over the edge of the bluestone at the patio entrance and emits a sweet, lemony fragrance when it is crushed underfoot.

A mounded bed, built up from the

soil remaining from the patio construction, adds height to the otherwise flat site. Located near the house and in full sun, it's a convenient place for growing culinary herbs. Woolly lamb's-ears (*Stachys byzantina*), snow-in-summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*), sweet alyssum and a border of tasty alpine strawberries hug the ground around the herbs, punctuated by the small, dainty, yellow flowers of Dahlberg daisies (*Dyssodia tenuiloba*).

The partially-shaded area at the rear of the garden has a cool and woody feeling, which is enhanced by a selection of plants that look as though they belong in a forest understory. Here I painted the fence dark brown so it would fade into the background. A clump of white birch makes a striking contrast against the fence, especially during the winter. In front of them, rhododendron 'P.J.M.' and 'Maximum' and Kurume azaleas make a year-round green foundation and bloom purple, white, and red, respectively, in the spring. Beneath, ferns and pachysan-



Yellow evening primroses and daylilies and pink astilbes (above) draw the eye into the neighbor's patch of daylilies. Astilbes and blue forget-me-nots (below) brighten up a mass of rhododendrons and azaleas.



dra grow among scented, pink-flowering wild geraniums and foxgloves. A butterfly bush (*Buddleia* sp.) in the corner lives up to the promise of its name when its long, purple flowers bring butterflies to the garden in late summer and fall.

A collection of bright flowers fills a sunny bed in front of the rambling roses. In early spring, rosy-pink coral-bells (*Heuchera sanguinea*), white and pink columbines (*Aquilegia* sp.) and yellow St.-John's-wort (*Hypericum* sp.) bloom, followed by yellow daylilies, deep-pink astilbes (*Astilbe arendsii* 'Federssee') and other perennials. This patch of color draws the eye through the garden and beyond the chain link fence into a mass of orange-yellow daylilies that I planted in my neighbor's garden. In midsummer, tall pink and white cleomes open, adding color until late September. These old-fashioned, hardy annuals need little care and reseed readily. The front of the bed is filled with the feathery leaves and gentle pink flowers of cosmos from late July until frost.

In front of the yews, a closely-planted line of rose-of-Sharon keeps the eye in the garden and leads it toward the patio. I've pruned these shrubs into a tight, vertical wall, creating another layer of privacy without taking up too much room. In late summer, their pink flowers enliven the surrounding plantings of rhododendron, azalea, lavender, snow-in-summer and caryopteris.

Large quantities of 'Angelique' tulips, daffodils, jonquils, grape hyacinths, anemones and crocuses announce the beginning of spring throughout the garden. Their flowers are a pleasant distraction from the few bare spots in the garden in early spring. Later on, the cream-edged, ribbed leaves of the many hostas planted here and there contrast dramatically with the deeper green foliage of the surrounding plants.

The garden requires very little work. In the spring, I weed it once, mulch, prune some of the shrubs and fertilize. By summer, all I do is water occasionally, prune plants that have flowered, and enjoy.

Long after the last bloom of the rose-of-sharon has fallen, and the butterflies no longer dance upon the buddleia flowers, I still view my garden with pleasure from the comfort of the couch. Waiting out the long winter, yearning for the first sign of spring, I look out on the garden and smile with pride. □

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