

Welcome to My Secret Garden

BY JESS BUTTERMORE

Like many of you, my love affair with gardening began as a child. I have fond memories of my grandma walking me around her backyard, with my skinned knees and pigtails, showing me how beautiful it was to grow things. Since then, I'd always dreamed of a big garden, one with a maze of raised beds and archways, trellises and arbors, and gravel paths wide enough to pull a wagon for hauling bountiful harvests — a place to retreat to when I need a moment of solace. It would be the garden I would cherish the rest of my days.

After nearly a decade of living in congested neighborhoods with no space for a garden, and nearly three years of searching, my husband and I finally found our forever home: a big cedar house in the woods nestled at the top of a hill and at the end of a long dirt road. The land spoke to us the moment we stepped onto it, and we knew we would do whatever we could to make it ours. A month later, we were juggling renovations, removing diseased trees, and dreaming of a farm and garden to call our own.

Fast-forward a year, and my husband made my biggest garden dream come true. With no construction background, he took a sketch of my dream garden and turned it into a reality. Every square inch was made with his two hands. Without the luxury of heavy machinery, this project was truly a labor of love.

Today, my garden is a place where birdsong is the background music, a circle of trees wraps it in a hug, and the sunsets dance behind the tree line showing off their cotton candy colors. Hours float by when I'm in my garden, lost in nature's therapy of pruning, harvesting, nurturing. It is where I pray, where I cry, where I go to reset and turn off my thoughts. It is where some of my most successful ideas have been brainstormed. My garden reflects who I am, and every new bloom is an expression of my creativity. It houses hundreds of flowers and herbs that I have mindfully chosen, carefully sown, patiently grown, and tucked into their beds with clear intention, purpose, and, most of all, hope. My garden is organized but wild. And as my flowers and herbs grow, so do I alongside them. My garden is my botanical story. ▸



Our initial year on the land, half of my garden consisted of flowers and the other half vegetables and herbs. By year two, I was growing 75% flowers and 25% vegetables and herbs. I enjoyed it immensely more because I realized that what I fill my garden with should be the plants that make me and my family the happiest. Today, I grow flowers and herbs exclusively, other than an occasional ornamental fruit, and I couldn't be happier with this botanical evolution.

Sometimes referred to as a pollinator garden, my garden is filled to the brim with colorful and fragrant flowers and herbs that attract and feed beneficial insects all year long. When I harvest, I make sure to always leave plenty of blooms and seeds to keep them busy and happy, and it's working. Our property is humming with life from dawn to dusk like never before.

Over the years, my garden has taken on a new purpose entirely, becoming a gathering place for those dearest to my heart — a place they can come to unwind, that radiates peacefulness and encourages you to slow down, to observe, to appreciate. My garden is a place that shares the fruits of my creativity and labor with family, friends, and neighbors.



But how did my garden transform from a bunch of wooden beds to a tranquil backyard sanctuary? One of the most important factors to us was the natural ambiance. When designing a garden space, it is often recommended that the garden is south-facing, however ours is west-facing and the perfect place to enjoy gorgeous summer sunsets. My garden still grows plenty of beautiful botanicals, and you just can't beat the sunset color show during golden hour. As long as your space gets six to eight hours of sunlight a day, consider how the natural surroundings can enhance the ambiance of the space when choosing the location.



We created a sense of privacy by building a fence around the garden perimeter to define and enclose it, and give visitors the feeling of being surrounded by beautiful botanicals at every turn. Then, we defined an entranceway to welcome visitors in to stay a while and create that whimsical secret-garden vibe. A gate with an arbor and hanging flowerpots anchors the entrance, with two large pots on either side, where the clematis reach up and out in either direction along the fence. A second arbor directly opposite the front one is home to our vining wisteria, giving the back wall a cozy cottage core feel. When people reach your garden entrance, you want them to feel as though they're walking into the very secret garden storybook they read as children.

During the design phase, we created pathways to guide visitors through the space. We chose simple gravel to keep the mud at bay and withstand the elements of our very wet Pacific Northwest springs. I chose to paint the outside of the garden beds black but leave the fencing that surrounds the garden the natural cedar, which coordinates with our home exterior. Tying the garden space into the living space makes it feel like an extension of our home. ▸



In addition to our garden beds, we incorporated several containers in various sizes and textures throughout the space. Several terra-cotta pots, which I find to be timeless, provide a striking contrast to the green foliage and the black beds. Galvanized buckets, metal stock tanks, and other assorted vintage metal containers incorporate a different material and add character and balance.

Arches and trellises add vertical height, texture, and visual interest to our garden while providing structure for vining and trailing plants like sweet pea, nasturtium, clematis, cucumelon, love-in-a-puff, morning glory, climbing rose, runner bean, snow pea, and loofah.

To create visual interest, plant your seedlings in clusters rather than rows, and intermingle them throughout the beds and containers in the style of a French kitchen garden (potager). Don't be afraid to pack the beds a bit more densely than you would if you were growing in rows, giving them only the bare minimum space they need to grow and thrive (which is generally a few inches less than what is recommended). I began using this growing style, called intensive planting, a couple years ago and I'll never go back; I water less, weed less, and harvest more. And, frankly, I love walking into my garden in August to find flowers and herbs completely covering the soil and overflowing out of their beds — to me, that is garden perfection! >

Consider adding a sitting area or eating space to your garden — a place to rest and relax, to read or journal, to entertain the masses or share coffee with a friend, or to simply be and enjoy the fruits of your labor. For the center of my garden, I had envisioned a long, simple picnic-style table with chairs along both sides. In fact, it was so important to me that when we designed the garden, we reserved a huge open space in the middle. One Mother's Day, my husband built it for me using leftover lumber and a quick sketch of my vision. Since then, our garden table has been home to countless coffee dates, cocktail hours, garden parties, homeschool classes, journaling and sketching sessions, and picnic lunches. It also doubles as my potting bench for all the garden tasks that present themselves, not to mention acting as a sunshade for our Bernese mountain dog. ▶



Design & Construction Tips When Planning Your Garden

Determine where to build: The space should receive at least six hours of sunlight a day, preferably more. Watch the sun positioning and movement over the space for a full year, if possible, before deciding on a location. Also take into account where your water source is and how it will reach your garden.

Sketch a layout: Draw the garden space with beds and containers, ensuring that you can reach every corner of each bed and that every main aisle has enough space to maneuver your garden cart.

Build the beds: The shape and size of your garden beds matter. We built beds that are 2 feet high off the ground to provide good soil depth and only 3 feet wide to keep harvesting easy. I recommend using a rot-resistant wood such as cedar, redwood, or white oak.

Fill the beds: We filled our beds with 100% organic material using a modified Hugelkultur method. Translated as "mound culture," it is a process where plants are grown on raised beds with a mounded shape created by layers of natural materials. We filled each bed with compostable material from our land: first a layer of partially rotted logs; then a layer of sticks, branches, and fallen leaves; then a layer of compost; and lastly, we filled the top 6 inches with a special organic garden blend consisting of organic compost, soil, sand, and bone meal.

Install irrigation: Research the best irrigation method for your space and lifestyle. We ran drip irrigation off an existing hose connection. We didn't have much luck with the soaker hose kits from hardware stores, so my husband built the system using hose and connector components that snap together.

Install a timer: Regardless of what irrigation system you choose, install a timer to save you from having to remember to flip a switch each day. Even with a timer, it is still necessary to visit your garden daily to provide heavy drenches on the hottest summer days and manually water hanging baskets and containers your irrigation system can't reach.

Build fencing and gates: Fencing defines the garden space, protects the plants from animals, and also protects animals from toxic plants. Install strategically placed gates for easy access.

Add ground cover: Here in the Pacific Northwest, the winters and springs get very muddy. To create a garden floor that would withstand the wet seasons, we first laid a layer of landscape fabric over the entire surface area of land (cutting around the beds), secured it with 6-inch garden stakes, installed edging around the entire perimeter to contain the gravel and secure the landscape fabric, and covered the garden with 10 tons of gravel, 2 inches deep. The gravel has done an amazing job at draining precipitation and completely eliminating mud from our garden pathways.

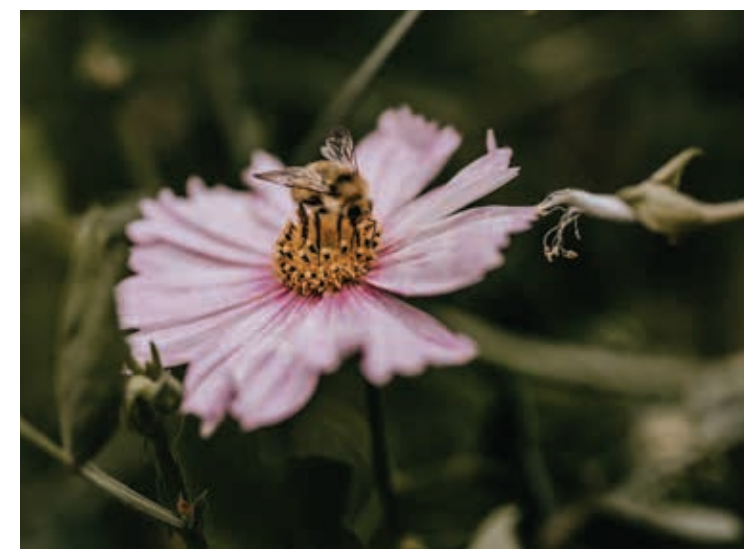
Add arches and arbors: We installed wire arches made from utility panels that can be purchased at most local feed stores or co-ops, and attached them to the insides of our garden beds with T-posts or the outside of the beds with metal staples. We added simple cedar arbors over each gate and to break up the longest edge of the garden. They add vertical interest and provide anchors for hanging baskets.

In your gathering space, incorporate hygge elements, such as cozy cushions and throw pillows, candles, tablecloths, blankets, and lanterns. Express your personal style while providing ambiance and usefulness at the same time. Consider repurposing old housewares, garden-themed antiques, or wooden or metal furniture that brings you joy. Old benches, chairs, and stools make charming plant stands, while old milk crates, rusty buckets, and cracked plaster birdbaths make lovely vessels. The weatherworn look these pieces will acquire over time will add to the character and charm of the space. Recently, I came across an old pair of rubber wellies that my kids had outgrown but I couldn't bear to part with. I gave them new life as vessels for my flowers by placing glass jars inside each boot and filling them with water for cut flowers. Alternatively, you could nail a couple holes in the bottom and fill them with soil to hold next year's annuals. I am daydreaming of violas cascading down the sides!



With our build complete and all the details in place, I spend my winters planning next year's garden and sowing hundreds of seeds in my greenhouse. With each seed, I am putting down roots on our land, creating backyard garden memories for our children, and a quiet place of solitude to gather my thoughts.

Did you know that the world of flowers and herbs has a language all its own? A complete glossary of flowers and herbs can be found in a book I co-authored with the incredibly talented writer Lisa McGuinness, called "The Love Language of Flowers" (Yellow Pear Press, 2023). In it, you will find a visual glossary of flowers and their Victorian meanings organized both alphabetically and by meaning so you can find the perfect botanical combination in every season. It also includes instructions and floral concepts as a foundation for creating sustainable focal arrangements, along with how to incorporate other interesting elements to bring a fresh look to your arrangements. Perhaps most importantly, it includes 30 slow botanical designs with meaning that have a wild yet elegant edge, accompanied by strategies that honor the seasonal rhythms of nature, build confidence, and provide flexibility to let your own creative voice develop along the way. It is truly an excellent resource for those seeking to grow their botanical creativity in a meaningful way. >





And with that, I leave you and your imagination to it. May these ideas inspire you to create a garden gathering space in the outdoor area available to you — a space where the world slows down, worries float away, and time drifts by. Create a space that your loved ones can enjoy with you, slow down with you, and break bread with you. Remember, the world speaks to us through the seasons and all the botanical gifts each season brings — that is, if we slow down long enough to listen.

“If you look the right way, you can see that the whole world is a garden.” — Frances Hodgson Burnett, “The Secret Garden”

Jess Buttermore is a published author and photographer, and owner of Cedar House Living LLC. She and her husband, Adam, and three children live in a small town nestled in the mountains outside of Seattle, Washington. Their homestead, Cedar House Farm and Garden, is her sanctuary where she enjoys gardening, herbalism, farming, baking, and making. Jess is most at peace when surrounded by botanicals, with her family and camera within arm's reach. Her book, “The Love Language of Flowers” (Yellow Pear Press, 2023), is available on Amazon and at your preferred book retailer. Jess shares her botanical journey on her website, cedarhouseliving.com, and on Instagram (@cedarhouseliving).

Photography by Jess Buttermore.