

Heidi and Tony Usibelli have been gardening in this location for over twenty years. The garden has changed as their energy levels change and is a great example of how simple adaptations can create a lower-maintenance landscape. The gardeners are quick to point out that part-time help is what keeps the garden looking good. Heidi sustained a back injury over the last few years but that hasn't stopped her from creating the garden that she sees in her mind's eye. Because of her commitment to gardening and her assistant's willingness to work closely with her, she continues to create a back yard sanctuary that is uniquely her own.

Heidi is not afraid to make mistakes and learn from them. Compost from all over Olympia was added to the soil to build the garden's organic matter. Leaf mould was added as mulch and Heidi admits it may have been too much. "My obsession with making and adding compost raised the levels in the garden. I accepted everything from everyone without asking what exactly was in it. The insect populations are exploding and we are the only ones in the neighborhood dealing with entire communities of moles." Could it be possible to add too much compost? When we went to look for ourselves, all that we noticed was the lush beauty of this backyard oasis. Sit down with Heidi and she will happily point out all of the things done wrong as readily as she will share all the things done right!

How many hours a week do you spend gardening? During the summer, they hire help in the garden for about 20 hours a week. This has been for the last five years, since Heidi hurt her back.

How do you control pests? Slugs are the main pest problem in this backyard surrounded by mature evergreen trees. Fewer large slugs are noticed since employing the cut-them-in-half strategy. One variety of clematis is very susceptible to slug damage and for that one, non-toxic slug bait is used. Aphids are tediously hand picked off of plants. If there is a problem plant, such as a rose bush that has aphids, that bush is unceremoniously removed from the garden. There is some kind of "mysterious" beetle eating clematis flowers and an investigation is underway to determine what it is. For Heidi, the easiest way to prevent pests; is to "not plant vegetables."

How do you fertilize? With the large amounts of organic matter used to develop this garden, fertilizing is infrequent and necessary only on high-need plants. The rhododendrons are fertilized with an organic rhody blend. The blooming flowers such as clematis receive high bloom blends from Black Lake Organics.

Tell us about your watering strategies. July and August are the only months that watering is regular. At that point, it's one to two times a week. Hand watering is a great way to connect with the garden and observe carefully what's going on with individual plants. As the garden grows together more, it's challenging to get to everything so a sprinkler may be brought in this year. A rain barrel supplies most of the water for the pots.

What approach do you use for controlling diseases? Preventing disease by growing hardy, disease-resistant plants and keeping them healthy is the easiest way to deal with disease. The other strategy is to ignore disease if it rears its ugly head! There is a rose with black spot and a dogwood with anthracnose but she doesn't want to spray them so she just ignores it.

How do you handle weeds? With a back injury, hiring weeding help is the only way for Heidi to deal with weeds. Weed cloth keeps the weeds down as does a heavy mulch layer but there is no replacement for hand weeding.

What are your biggest gardening challenges? The inability to continue doing her own “hand dirtying” work. She has been lucky to find good help but it can be challenging to work around someone else’s schedule. Back pain has been a humbling experience for this avid gardener.

What makes gardening fun or satisfying for you? Watching everything thrive. This gardener loves to compost! There is nothing quite like a steaming pile of organic matter. The thrill of the plant hunt, finding the perfect plant and “bagging it,” is a satisfying part of gardening that Heidi continues to participate in. Heidi says with her usual sense of humor, “Finding a new clematis is enough to make me scream!”