

Karen and George Bray love to be outside. The outdoor spaces they have created must make it hard to ever go indoors. “There are always surprises and challenges, wonderful scents, colors, and varieties of plants,” says Karen of why she gardens. “I had a wonderful grandmother who loved to garden. I feel a connection with her when I garden. Gardening is in my hard drive,” she adds. “My earliest memory is being placed in a corn patch in a Victory Garden in Montana, and having a feeling of bliss. The garden was a place where the war could be forgotten.”

You enter the Brays’ garden off East Bay Drive into a wooded glen that was once all grass. Since fir roots preclude plantings, huge pots are used to add color – primarily blue and white – from ornamentals.

On the Budd inlet side, the Brays created an outdoor “room” under another grove of firs with walls of boxwood. Bird feeders swing gaily from a line.

Salvaging is another theme: The hazelnut shells lining paths are from an orchard in Oregon. Whenever a neighbor is repaving, Karen collects broken concrete to add to the paths in the upper garden. The potting shed under the deck provides protection from the elements with a view, through salvaged windows.

But the showpiece of their garden is the dramatic new landscape they put in just 1 ½ years ago replacing the lawn that once swept down to Budd Inlet. The Brays were concerned about water quality in the inlet, and did not want to use herbicides and pesticides that would eventually find their way to the beach. They decided to completely landscape the slope as a drought tolerant, or xeriscape garden, meaning it will require no extra water after the first two years. The landscape is lush and full already, a testament to their generous use of compost and soil amendments.

How many hours per week do you spend in the garden during growing season? Karen spends around 8-10 hours “in a normal year.” Karen also spends time tending to her garden and orchard adjacent to Priest Point Park, where she has a cutting garden, vegetables, and berries as well as chickens.

How do you control pests? Mostly we don’t worry about them. We try to choose plants that are resistant to pest problems. We try to keep the plants healthy by mulching with compost, and using brewed compost tea and worm tea. The brewed compost tea must be used within 24 hours. We purchase it at one of the local nurseries. The worm tea we purchase as a concentrate at the Farmers

Market. Put 1 tablespoon in 1 gallon of water, and spray that on and under an infested plant. For slugs, we do use the new nontoxic phosphate repellent Sluggo. This was a bad year for aphids – we hose them off. As for the notching on the leaves from root weevils on rhodies and hydrangea, we tolerate that. We don’t even *think* of using pesticides!

How do you fertilize? We use all organic, natural fertilizers, and it’s amazing what you can do with them. We use alfalfa pellets, washed cow manure, fish meal, kelp, blood meal, and a general-use organic mix from a local nursery. The washed cow manure we get from a dairy farmer near Littlerock. It’s not as strong as regular manure but still has lots of nutrients. We rototill it in or use 3-4 inches as a mulch – it has wonderful moisture retention.

We make compost, and also add our chicken manure to it. We use “free range” worms to compost our kitchen waste – meaning we just dig our scraps in without bothering with a worm bin!

How do you conserve water in your garden? By having completely removed grass from the property. We water when needed, usually by drip irrigation or hand watering. For the first year we needed to water our new plants more until they became established. We check the soil to determine when we have watered enough. Old perimeter plants – mostly rhodies – we water if the leaves begin to droop. Fir trees soak up a lot of water, so we use soaker hoses below them. We also collect water in a homemade rainbarrel.

How do you handle plant diseases? By keeping the plants healthy. For black spot on roses, we use compost tea. We try to avoid purchasing plants that are a problem.

What is your approach to weeds? We mulch heavily so that we have few weeds, and those that we do have, we pull by hand. We try to weed before they go to seed.

The Brays have a strong environmental ethic that goes beyond being masterful organic gardeners, to having helped establish a biodiesel supply in Olympia, bicycling when possible, organizing the neighbors to apply for and join the Pesticide-Free Neighborhood, and purchasing organic produce.

“When society ceases to satisfy, there is always the garden.”

Interview by Rachel Donnette