

Kathy Callison's artistic eye has helped her convert a long, narrow, overgrown lot into an alluring expanse of gardens. After purchasing her one-half acre property in 1999, she established the "bone structure" of the gardens before she designed the planted areas. With the earth reshaped and boulders and trees in place for a backdrop, she then planted shrubs and berries, finishing the design with the garden beds. Today, while raising vegetables and young fruit trees, she also maintains and enjoys four lovely garden "rooms," each with a different ambience.

The first is the "red" garden at the front of the house, which she reconstructed with a berm along the street and filled with year-round, red flowers and foliage and drought-tolerant perennials. To the west is a woodland garden with a dry streambed. It is bordered by woodland trees and shrubs and offers a peaceful view from her office and kitchen. In the middle of the property is the Apollo garden, inspired by Kathy's visit to Delphi, Greece. This garden integrates statuary, boulders, and plantings that calm and inspire. At the far end of the property is her wild garden of native plants and trees, providing an escape from daily routines.

Kathy's art background is apparent in the combinations arranged for color and unusual leaf design and texture. The grasses and tall perennials towards the back of the property create a meadow effect. In Apollo's garden, gray and yellow foliage and flowers add softness, texture, and a Mediterranean ambience to the boulders they surround. In another area, lavender, lithodora, agapanthus, and thyme compose a blue and white Mediterranean "ocean" garden.

What is your approach to watering? My sprinkler system has valves and attached hoses at intervals along the length of the property. During summer, I sprinkle areas for 10-20 minutes twice a week to give a thorough soaking; the mulch reduces evaporation. The vegetable garden gets overhead sprinkling 2-3 times a week. I also use a two-gallon watering can to spot-water new plantings.

Do you use compost? Yes, I compost both my yard waste and kitchen waste. Mixed with soil, the decomposed grass clippings create a nice "duff" layer when lightly broadcast around the plantings. My vegetable compost goes in holes I dig around the gardens to enrich the soil.

How do you fertilize? I use only organic fertilizers. An organic starter helps new plants take root and fish/kelp fertilizer nourishes them to maturity. For vegetables, shrubs, blueberries and rhodies, I broadcast pre-mixed dry organic blended fertilizers two times a year, in spring and fall. I also apply kelp to all the gardens once a year to increase the plants' hardiness.

What steps do you take to avoid plant diseases? I don't use toxic chemicals. Sulfur dusting of the plant and surrounding soil helps alleviate disease. Also, moving a diseased plant to a location with better air circulation may help. Generally, clean beds and healthy soil assure healthy plants.

How do you attract birds, butterflies, and other wildlife into your garden? With bright-colored flowers, birdfeeders, nesting shrubs, cracks in rocks for frogs and garter snakes, bird nesting boxes and a mason bee box to attract those excellent, native early spring pollinators.

Can you offer any tips for handling garden pests? Yes. Weed well in order to protect plants from darkness and dampness. Surround plants with bark mulch or diatomaceous earth, which slugs don't like. If an aphid problem is just beginning, clip off the infested tips of the plant and dispose of them away from the garden. If the infestation is severe, use an insecticidal soap solution.

How do you handle weeds? Pull all year! Winter is a great time to weed because, with plants low to the ground, weeds are easy to see. Also, a rich, loose soil simplifies weed pulling. To avoid weeds, I spread newspaper in the gardens, covering it with bark mulch. I don't worry about most weeds in the lawn, although I remove dandelion flowers before they go to seed, and I plan to de-thatch, aerate and overseed in the fall. The ever-present blackberry vines also require constant clipping and pulling.

Lacking time to paint due to her busy work schedule, Kathy says her gardens have become her canvas for forming visual impressions. Like a palette she can work on in small increments, they offer her a way to express herself creatively. "I love seeing the gardens change with the seasons," she says, "and I try to make them beautiful all year long by choosing appropriate plants."

Interview by Sharon Moore