

Kelly and Alice Hamilton have been gardening at this site for four years. Before they built this home, the site had been a vacant lot and weed-dumping ground. They have done a marvelous job of transforming the steep site into a delightful retreat. They participated in the pesticide-free neighborhood project last year, and have continued organic gardening this year.

How many hours a week do you spend gardening? Well more this year because of the tour, but usually I'd say 15 to 20 hours a week. I spend most of the mornings outdoors until it gets too hot, then I come inside.

How do you handle weeds? We pretty much pull the weeds. I plant things so tight, that I often don't see the weeds until they are pretty big. I really kind of over-plant, but it shades a lot of weeds. I do a lot of weeding in the spring, then during the summer I just pull them when I see them. Our biggest problems are horsetail and morning glory. I've been cutting them, but I think I'll go back to pulling. We can't spray anything because of being so close to the water and being in the pesticide-free neighborhood. But even in all the other places I've lived and things I've tried, nothing has really worked on horsetail. You just have to keep pulling.

What about pests? Well this year we've had wasps trying to build nests all around. We keep knocking them off with a strong spray of water from the hose. On my roses, I use the hose about once a week to wash off white aphids. This year we had black aphids on the nasturtiums and dahlias. Those we just cut out, bagged and disposed of. Same thing with tent caterpillars.

How do you water? We have an automatic watering system that comes on between 3 and 4 a.m. Typically we water each zone for 20 minutes two times a week. With this hot weather, we've set it to run for ten minutes every day. The system has a rain sensor that automatically turns off the system when it has been rainy. I don't think that has happened this summer! I hand water the potted plants and the birdbath.

What about fertilizing and compost? Most of the garden gets fertilized once a year. The pots and vegetables get fertilizer when planted, and then get watered with a liquid fertilizer for the first part of the summer. Our soil is clay and rocky, prairie-like fill. About a year ago we brought in ten yards of washed cow manure, which was very nice to work with. It was a lot of manure for our garden! This year we skipped that, but next year we will do it again, though maybe not ten yards.

Do you attract birds to your garden? We try! We hang feeders to attract finches and other songbirds. We also get crows, gulls and squirrels. The wrens and ground feeders love to splash in the pond.

What is one of your biggest gardening challenges? Keeping up!

What makes gardening satisfying? I'd rather be outdoors all year round. It's sort of my thing. I don't mind weeding, I like planting. The results are satisfying. I love to wander in other people's gardens and see what they do.

Interview by Jane Mountjoy-Venning