

Greg Lukens and Erica Merrill have created a child-friendly yard and garden over the last six years. Like many of us, busy lives mean they have limited time to garden. So the past few years they have made changes to their yard to bring the care needed more in line with the time available.

About how much time do you spend on yard care each week? I guess we spend about five hours, plus or minus, on average each week. Every few weeks we might do a blitz. We can get a lot done in a two-hour blitz. We've really tried to choose plants that don't need much care.

Describe some of the changes you've made to reduce the garden maintenance time needed. After our children were born we decided to remove the vegetable beds. We can practically see the Farmers Market from our house, and it seemed like buying--rather than growing--fresh vegetables made more sense for now. That opened up the yard, allowing more play space. The other time saver is choosing drought-tolerant plants for most of the garden.

How about watering? We don't water much, just in the hottest part of the summer. This summer is a real test. Our front yard has been watered twice this summer. Most of our plants are water-wise and many are native. We do water our blueberries and new plants more frequently. Much of the rest of the garden is hand watered with a watering wand; sometimes we use an oscillating sprinkler. We also use mulch to help hold the moisture in.

How do you handle weeds? In the garden beds we weed by hand. In the older established beds we don't have many weeds because of the time spent preventing weed problems. We plant ground covers and use mulch in the beds. In the paths we use wood chips. Greg is an arborist, so we always have a supply of wood chips! Along the fences bordering neighbors there is morning glory (bindweed), which provides an ongoing challenge. It is satisfying to haul off armloads of morning glory. Right now we don't worry about weeds in the lawn, we just mow them along with the grass.

How do you take care of slugs, aphids or other pests? We don't have many slugs in our current garden; we had more when we had a vegetable garden. We just hand pick slugs and kill them, or sometimes we just ignore them. For aphids we let the ladybugs do their thing. We have a lot of

ladybugs. If the ladybugs need help, we cut out small infestations; occasionally we use a soap spray for a large infestation. We don't really have a problem with pests.

Do you use compost? Yes, we compost our kitchen waste here, and some yard debris. Since we've changed our garden to predominately shrubs and perennials, we don't have much yard debris to compost. We also buy some compost. We use it as mulch and we mix the compost into the soil when we plant. We use compost to fertilize our plants each year.

Tell me more about your fertilizing routine. We primarily rely on compost. We usually fertilize once a year in the fall. We use some fish fertilizer, organic fertilizer, and for the trees, fertilizer spikes. Native plants are great because they need so little care after they get established!

It looks like you've included plants to attract birds. Yes, birds, butterflies and beneficial insects. Right outside the kitchen window is a giant butterfly bush that is busy with birds and butterflies all summer long. Our red-flowering currant brings hummingbirds to the yard in the spring, and then they visit the honeysuckle and other flowering plants in the summer. We have lots of ladybugs and other beneficial insects. We have fun looking for them with the children.

What are some of your gardening challenges? We have a corner lot, so privacy is an issue. Greg built the fence and trellis and that helps a lot. We added layers of shrubs and plants to create more screening from the street. Considering where we live, I think we've done a pretty good job in six years.

Why do you garden? It is satisfying, it is fun; it is kind of hard to describe. Partly it is satisfying to see things grow. And there is something fulfilling about working hard, you know – shoveling compost or wood chips, digging a hole, hauling something. When we moved in, there were just a few trees and grass. Partly we've created the garden for ourselves, and partly the garden is for others to enjoy as well. I hear from people I don't even know how much they love walking past our garden. I guess that's why we agreed to be on the garden tour – we like sharing our garden with others.

Interview by Jane Mountjoy-Venning