

Carol Peterson and Terry Miller's garden shows us what can be done in only six years with a gravelly city lot. "We had been living on a boat for ten years, and we had reached a point where we really wanted to garden," Carol says. After building a retaining wall, they brought in tons of turf mix to begin building soil on top of the hard pan. Though they had no original plan, after designing and planting one garden area, they branched out with other connecting gardens. Today, their property is an eclectic mix of perennials and exotics, punctuated by birdhouses, garden sculpture, and odalisques that Terry builds. He has even constructed an outdoor aviary that houses many types of finches such as canaries, lady gouldians, java rice and rosy rumps.

As you enter the property, you'll see their new front garden, which is flourishing even though it's only a year old. Pointing to huge boulders placed there, Carol says laughing, "I told Terry I wanted rocks for my birthday, so he had these boulders delivered." Carol likes exotic plants, perhaps because she lived in Mexico for a number of years. Two of her favorites are the kangaroo apple and Australian bush mint she has planted. She also grows orchids in her greenhouse. A love of vines has led her to include honeysuckle, jasmine, clematis and climbing roses in her garden plans.

How many hours do you work in the garden each week? Carol: We work hard in the spring, but by mid-June we're just maintaining. I'd say ten hours per week on average.

Your garden gets a lot of sun. How often do you water? Carol: We've noticed that as we keep amending our soil with compost, it holds water better. I watch my plants carefully and only water when they look slightly droopy. Perennials tend to need less water than annuals. We have a built-in sprinkler system in our back garden and lawn area that we run in the early morning as needed. Our new drip-irrigation system in the front garden works well and really conserves water. We also use soaker hoses where we have no sprinkler system.

How often do you fertilize? Carol: For the small lawn, once in spring and once in late fall. I top

dress the flower beds with three to four inches of compost in spring. A bit of fertilizer helps the plants, too, just as they're beginning to leaf out in spring. I also use a slow-release fertilizer in my hanging baskets. We don't compost our yard and kitchen waste. We purchase compost and have it delivered, instead.

How do you deal with pests? Carol: I pick, poke and cut slugs by hand. We also set out slug bait in pop bottles that are turned backwards so we don't poison our pets or the birds. It's a never-ending problem, though. We set a mole trap once, got a mole and haven't had much trouble with them since. Aphids aren't a problem, even though we grow many roses. The wind may provide enough air circulation to keep the aphid population down, but I'm not sure.

How do you avoid diseases on your plants? Carol: By consciously planting disease-resistant varieties, we try not to introduce disease into our garden. I love roses, though, and have learned over the years some approaches for avoiding their diseases. I prune them, which helps air circulation. Avoiding watering their leaves and picking up all the debris around them also helps roses stay healthy. This year I'm experimenting with potted roses because they appear to be more disease free.

Do you attract birds, butterflies and other wildlife to your garden? Carol: Definitely. We provide food for wild birds as well as squirrels. Also, we're attracting butterflies by planting herbs such as fennel, and Sweet Cicely.

How do you avoid weeds? Carol: Weeds are not a major problem because I plant perennials close together to shade out the weeds. But I do pull any weeds I see in the gardens. We dig weeds out of our front lawn, and we pull weeds out of our footpaths.

Carol finds gardening relaxing and rewarding. She says she enjoys looking for new varieties of plants that will thrive. Using the greenhouse Terry has built, she starts many of her perennials from seed. She also enjoys dividing and giving her plants as gifts to her friends. Carol's enthusiasm for growing things has rubbed off on her family. "I'm proud to say all my children are adult gardeners, too."

Interview by Sharon Moore