



Marie White spent a few years designing and landscaping her garden in Ahwatukee. She made a 260-square-foot pond the focus of her 36-foot deep, 76-foot-wide backyard space and created a series of outdoor rooms.

Big ideas for little yards

Planned small-garden spaces can increase your living area

Sadie Jo Smokey, The Arizona Republic, Sept. 16, 2006 12:00 AM

As the mercury drops, our desire to get outdoors and dig in the dirt rises, no matter the size of our yard. Although many urban gardeners lament the lack of space, others rejoice that their yard chores don't monopolize their time.

Celebrate the space you have by selecting a handful of plants, furniture pieces and other garden features that look proportional and serve multiple purposes. A garden with a small footprint can be just

as inviting and visually interesting as a larger yard, said Marie White, owner of Living Rooms Landscape Design, in the Ahwatukee section of Phoenix.

In a large yard, homeowners have more space to create areas for conversation, eating, reading, gardening and cooking. Homeowners still can have those spaces and functions in a small yard, the areas are just more condensed, White said, and it takes planning.

White spent a few years designing and landscaping her Ahwatukee garden.

"I spent a lot of time sitting out here thinking about how I wanted to use the space," White said. "I knew I wanted water, but not a pool. Maybe a large pond, but I didn't want to cut the yard in half."

When White and her husband bought the property 10 years ago, the backyard consisted of colored gravel, a withering lawn and a few citrus trees. Views included neighboring two-story houses, a dense ficus tree and a mature mesquite tree.

White carved up the space, 36 feet deep by 76 feet wide, with a series of outdoor rooms, each with its own view and multiuse areas. The dimensions of the space demanded an uncomplicated design, so White designed a 260-square-foot pond as the focus.

She designed seating areas with diagonal views in each corner of the yard to make the garden appear larger. She included sensual aspects of a garden: the scent of rosemary or myrtle, movement of trees in a breeze, the sound of trickling water from a fountain and changing textures and colors of lily pads and blossoms in the pond.

Tricks such as lighting each corner of the garden make it more inviting at night, drawing people to different areas, instead of crowding around the door.

"I like to live outside," White said. "We wanted to be able to entertain 20 people or two people. Lights in the corners add depth and make the garden seem larger."

In shady areas, plants such as creeping fig, asparagus and hibiscus thrive.

In one corner, a wall made of textured block performs triple duty, providing privacy for the Jacuzzi on one side and serving as a planter and a bench on the other.

The block walls around the garden are covered in a tinted stucco. Between the walls and the patio are narrow areas for trees, shrubs and vines to grow. Using soil excavated from the pond, White created a terraced area to inexpensively add another dimension to the garden.

White managed to fit in several trees, including a few tall, wispy Indian rosewood (*dalbergia sissoo*). Pots dotted around the garden feature elephant's food and the feathery foliage of ferns. She also saved the citrus trees: a navel orange and a grapefruit.

White confesses to breaking the design rules of planting things in groups of three or five. The proportions of a compact garden can't cope with great swaths of plants that require large areas for roots, so she planted vines, lantana and a dwarf olive that contributed to the Mediterranean look she desired.

"I'm still dividing it up into different areas to create different rooms in the space," White said. "You wouldn't have a house that's 2,500 square feet that's one room. It's the same thing with a backyard."

At the east side of the garden, an outdoor kitchen, barbecue, sink, workstation and bar are steps away from two square dining tables under a large orange umbrella. Ruellia, an otherwise invasive plant, grows contained in a space that features a rustic sculpture. For most of the year, the shaggy ruellia has dark-green leaves with bright-purple blossoms.

This is not a garden for croquet or playing basketball, although White admits her Bunco group enjoys playing games on the terraced patio.

"I didn't want everything to be the same, I wanted versatility," White said. By carefully designing the yard, White said she's increased the square footage of living space. "Adding living space outdoors is cheaper than physically adding a room onto your house," White said. "Your budget goes farther in a small yard, too. You can afford more plants."

White said each of her outdoor rooms can be re-created for gardens smaller than hers. She advises focusing on what you want, drawing up a plan, then executing it according to your budget. If entertaining is important, invest in a matching collection of small tables, chairs, love seats, lighting and outdoor carpets. If edible plants are the goal, plant compact or dwarf varieties of herbs, fruits and vegetables that grow well in small spaces.

"I found plants that work for me," White said. "I didn't want thorns. With trees, I wanted to see light, see movement and hide the houses. We're out here year-round."

Designing your small garden

Make the most of your space with these ideas:

- Small gardens don't have to be cute or plain. Approach the garden's design the same way you would any other room.

Do you want a quiet place to read? Consider a swing. Enjoy eating alfresco? You need a table and a chair. A soft, cool space for children or pets to play? Install a small, manageable patch of grass. Plan well and you can find room for it all.

- After deciding on the location for your outdoor living space, turn your attention to making the space feel like a garden with greenery.
- Think vertical. The combination of trees, vines and shrubs along with pots can make a garden appear lush and inviting without dominating the space.
- Leave an open section in the center of a tiny garden to maximize the feeling of space. If you need shade, consider umbrellas that can be closed and moved, instead of permanent shade structures.
- Sidewalks, patios and paths should look good year-round. Limit yourself to one or two materials, such as flagstone, mulch, decomposed gravel or concrete.
- Inexpensive touches to concrete, such as a rock-salt or broom finish, add details to an otherwise boring surface.
- Create a focal point in each corner with color, pots, furniture, water features or plants.
- The walls are also part of your garden. Use colored stucco, painted murals, mirrors or sculptures where plants are impractical or impossible.
- Use bright color on umbrellas, pillows and pots as an accent.
- Choose bold sculptural edible plants, such as lemon grass.
- Consider different shapes for water features. Marie White, of Living Rooms Landscape Design, designed a "T"- shaped pond with the narrow end beginning just steps from the French doors. The pond features a fountain, lily pads, billowy umbrella grass and showy goldfish.
- Tailor the audio volume of the water to the specific setting within the garden. A bubbler works well in seating areas because the water shoots straight up and falls back down into a pool of water, making a

quieter background sound. To cover up traffic noise, a fountain with water crashing and splashing into a pool of water works well.

- Screen with green. By combining walls or fences with planters, plants can provide privacy while contributing color, texture and movement.
- Plant for permanence. Use long-season bloomers such as lantana or bougainvillea as your primary source of color rather than multiple pots of seasonal flowers.
- Use containers creatively. Consider hanging baskets, window boxes and pots that can be attached to walls.

- *Sadie Jo Smokey*

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