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Back Yard Makeovers: Edible and Drinkable

By Cathy Tyson



Bill and Mary Massarweh's upper level seating area, nestled next to their vineyard in Moraga. Photos Doug Kohen

landscape designers but were not impressed. "They came up with ordinary designs - we never wanted to do anything ordinary," said Bill. With the help of Owner /Designer Steve Lambert of Garden Lights the couple found a designer who shared their dream. Input also came from a cousin who suggested adding wine grapes and their son, now a landscape architect, who recommended a seating area high up on the hill and ideas to re-vamp the front yard as well.

Now the property has an incredible array of unique plants, almond, pomegranate, peach, olive and lemon trees along with a dramatic water feature, fire pits and an outdoor kitchen united by a flagstone patio and spectacular walkway that winds up the hill.

It took seven months, with a month off during the rainy season, to completely transform the half acre property. Bill sums it up, "You can spend money on a painting that's one dimensional - you look at it to enjoy it. In other words, the experience is one of 'duality' - you and the picture. With the garden there is no duality - you are in the picture, listening to the water, enjoying the birds, smelling the flowers." The Massarwehs absolutely love their garden.

Soon enough the couple will be enjoying their wine as well. The 200 pinot noir vines are expected to produce between ten and twelve cases of wine. Bill, who is President of the Lamorinda Winegrowers Association, notes that the southwestern exposure gives the vines plenty of sunshine. The 2008 inaugural vintage is bottled, the 2009 is aging in a French oak barrel, and the 2010 harvest is yet to come; the balance of the yard is fully developed, lush and ready for enjoyment right now.

The Edible

Beth Ferree and husband John Eaton have a flat and sunny one-third acre lot near the heart of Lafayette. Although they loved the expansive back lawn that their children - twins, now in their late 20's - spent endless hours enjoying when they were younger, these empty nesters were interested in something more productive that would use significantly less water.

"It was exhausting, a huge job," explains Ferree, recalling when she and her husband ripped out the original front yard and replaced it with natives and drought tolerant plants. All along the couple considered taking the back lawn out, but after surviving the front yard transformation, the task seemed daunting.

Hello Urban Farmers, goodbye lawn. The couple applied and was selected to participate in the Urban Farmers (UF) program - where the homeowner supplies the land and water and UF provides the labor and know-how to design, cultivate and harvest an organic garden - sharing the bounty with the collective. They tilled the lawn under and installed a multitude of three foot by fifteen foot beds with drip irrigation.

A cover crops of fava beans were planted to help break up the clay soil and add nutrients; their first season forty heirloom tomato plants were planted along with fruit trees, an herb garden, and a bee hive that the family pooch, Aslan, keeps an eye on. Although they are still working to naturally enrich the soil there is already a bountiful crop from the beds.

"We just love it. I feel like we are in Italy - it's beautiful, fun and the water bill is down substantially," says Ferree. "My kids think we've turned into hippies." She explains it really isn't that hard, Urban Farmers made it easy -



Artistic circular staircase marks entrance to hillside garden.



Mary and Bill Massarweh



Table grapes grown with pinot noir vines



water feature



pomegranate from fruit tree



Rows of organic heirloom tomatoes in Beth Ferree and John Eaton's backyard. Photos Doug Kohen



Nearly ripe tomatoes



Buzzing bee hive



Beth Ferree with Aslan.

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