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Front Porch: Backyard dreams keep on growing

Cindy Hval/SR

• • • First came the Shed Mahal.

Many years ago, our small sons had attempted to dig to China from our backyard. The resulting trench, shored up with whatever boards and branches they could scavenge, was a marvel of elementary engineering. It was also dangerous when 6-year-old Sam found himself in over his head.

The filling in of the trench prompted my husband to build the shed of his dreams. Technically it was a “Colonial Cedar Textured Shed with Natural Cedar Trim,” but a newspaper editor dubbed it the “Shed Mahal.” It added rustic elegance to our backyard. And it was good.

Flash forward seven years. A lengthy magazine assignment brought a nice bonus, and I purchased a long-coveted Great Gazebo.

Flowers, outdoor furniture, a propane fireplace and strings of twinkling white lights completed our outdoor living room. And it was good.

Then came the Delightful Deck. Our third son was graduating from high school, and unlike many of Derek’s DIY projects, this one had a deadline. It had to be completed for Zach’s graduation party. He and the boys worked throughout the spring, hammering, mixing concrete, priming and staining.

Derek’s design featured a privacy corner, solar lighting, and new French doors in the dining room that opened out onto the deck. A propane heater, outdoor dining set and a bar table and chairs for the privacy nook completed our outdoor dining room. And it was very good.

Next came a raised bed garden. Derek had often talked of fresh veggies plucked from our garden and served on the Delightful Deck. I thought he was still in the dreaming stage, so imagine my surprise when I returned from a book signing event last spring and found a 4-by-12 foot, fully planted raised bed garden in front of the deck.

“Um. I thought we were going to you know, talk, about the garden,” I said. “Maybe discuss what to plant?”

“No need,” said my proud spouse. “I figured it all out.”

Which may have been why last summer we had enough cilantro to supply a chain of Mexican restaurants, enough tomatoes to share with the neighborhood and so many cucumbers I ran out of ways to use them. Nevertheless, the results of his first harvest were good – very good.

Thus inspired, this spring Derek DOUBLED the size of the garden. He did this while I was at a yet another author event. I'm seriously thinking about postponing future weekend speaking engagements.

I thought too late because last month I came home and found five large dirt-filled barrels adjacent to the gazebo and a large white vinyl framed square directly in front of the newly enlarged garden.

The barrels ruined the sightline from the Great Gazebo to the Shed Mahal. And the white vinyl thing? It was bad. Very bad.

The Delightful Deck is glorious in its natural wood beauty and the garden is framed with rustic-looking composite materials. The white whatever looked as out of place as a Baptist in a beer garden.

You don't stay married 30 years without learning something about tact and diplomacy. Unfortunately, when confronted with the latest unannounced additions to our backyard, I forgot most of what I'd learned.

"What is THAT?" I asked, pointing at the vinyl thing my husband was in the midst of assembling.

"And what are THOSE?" I asked, pointing at the awkwardly placed barrels.

Derek sat back on his haunches and gestured to the homely barrels.

"Those are my raspberry, white raspberry, blueberry and blackberry pots," he said. "You know I've always wanted to grow blueberries."

He's also wanted to raise chickens, own a pig and perhaps a few goats. I grew worried.

I asked if the barrels had to stay where they were or could they maybe be moved along the fence line.

Derek shrugged.

"What's with the white thing?" I asked.

"This is my new 6-foot-by-6-foot keyhole compost garden bed," he replied.

He lost me at compost. Actually, I lost it at compost.

“You’re putting a COMPOST pile in front of our Delightful Deck?” I asked.

OK, I shrieked.

Strangely, Derek does not respond well to shrieking. Especially, when he’s been laboring in the hot sun for hours, constructing the urban farm of his dreams.

Only problem? He forgot I had my own backyard dreams of a grassy lawn where we’d play Bocce with friends, and someday watch grandchildren frolicking across the green oasis.

There was no room for a keyhole compost garden bed in my dreams, but thankfully there was room for it off to the side of the deck – which is where, after some heated negotiations, it was moved. The boys and I lugged the berry barrels to the fence line and once again peace reigned in our backyard.

That is until Derek started pointing out greenhouses in the Sunday sales ads.

His urban farm dream continues to grow, while my grassy backyard oasis shrinks. At this rate, he may want to consider adding a doghouse. Just in case.

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