

A photograph of a lush backyard garden. In the foreground, there's a paved area with light-colored rectangular stones. To the left, a large, dense green tree with some yellowing leaves stands. In the center, a large metal water tub sits on a wooden platform. To the right, a large bush of colorful flowers, including orange, pink, and white daisies, is in bloom. In the background, a wooden fence and a multi-story apartment building are visible.

The **DIY** backyard

*How to
install a home
landscape
that'll make
you proud*

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Photography by
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e have all seen the perfectly groomed gardens on TV house-flipping shows and in magazines, including this one. Pinterest is a slideshow of landscapes that are intended to inspire creativity but often just lead to feelings of inadequacy. It's as if these picture-perfect settings were chia pets—just add water and watch them grow!

The truth is grittier. Few homeowners can afford to hire professionals—designers, stone masons, carpenters, gardeners—to make the magic happen. Instead, with a great sense of urgency, they rush to the local Southern States or Lowes, where they pick up bags of mulch and topsoil, concrete pavers, potted plants and saplings, and, oh, that beautiful shovel—gotta have that too.

The plan is to spend a few spring weekends getting dirty and sweaty, a small sacrifice for the tidy and colorful yard that will soon materialize.

Hate to break this to you, but no. That old saw about Rome not being built in a day applies to your own half acre. But a yard that works for you, looks good, and provides a sweet spot for you to hang out with friends and family? A place where you can admire the cardinals and monarchs, and curse the mosquitoes and the squirrel that raids your bird feeder? You can have all of that, without maxing out your credit card, if you just slow down.

As an example I present my sister Julie's yard. It has taken four-plus years to achieve its current state. It has required a lot of hard work—mainly by her, our sister, our niece, and me, but with some professional help. Yes, we have worn out the pavement between her house in town and Southern States and Lowes, and also taken occasional trips to far-flung nurseries for deals on plants and trees. We have paid with strained backs, sore muscles, smashed fingertips, and patches of skin rubbed raw beneath our gloves.

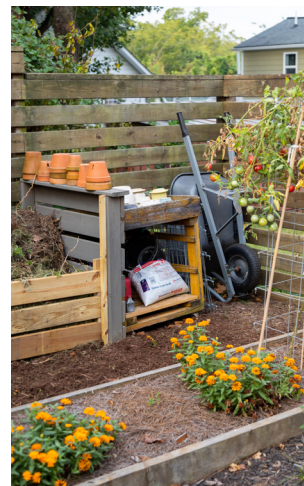
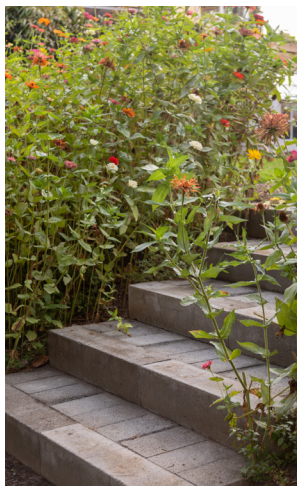
But we've come a long way (a garden is never done but rather always evolving), and we intend to stay the course—whatever it may be, because we make a lot of stuff up as we go along and Julie has a restless mind.

Julie estimates the total investment in materials and professional help at about \$10,000. And, full disclosure, all of the design work has been free, because she's a landscape architect, both a

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Long-needle pine straw and tupelo trees soften up and contrast with the concrete-slab walkway. *Below, left to right:* A smooth sumac and a thicket of black locust trees provide shade and a property-line buffer. Concrete-block steps lead down "zinnia hill." The raised beds, made of thick cedar planks, anchor the southwest corner of the yard.

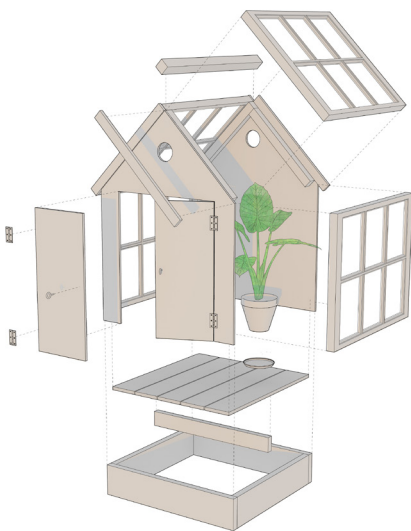


UVA professor and private practitioner in the field. Her professional status has also earned discounts at nurseries and garden centers, so I suppose that the total cost without those savings would be about a thousand bucks higher.

But even without those advantages, I believe that anyone with some imagination, a lot of determination, and a vision of how she wants her yard to look and function, could create a similarly pleasing place. The primary requirements are patience, a willingness to make mistakes, and a tolerance for imperfection. Plus, once in a while, a day spent toiling on something that has to be completely redone.

That's when you crack open a cold beverage and retire to the porch or the air-conditioned

Greenhouse build



The tiny greenhouse took a weekend to build. It consists of a square base with a central floor support, slats atop the base, four antique window frames with six panes apiece, and sides cut from a single four-by-eight-foot sheet of 3/8-inch plywood. Construction requires a moderate skill level and a little help from your friends (who might handle a circular saw better than you do). All of the materials—from Facebook Marketplace and Lowes—cost less than \$125.



A small lawn maintains the open feel of the upper tier of the backyard, while the DIY greenhouse serves as a focal point, and the bed along the north fence line adds texture and color with plantings of clematis, blueberry bushes, and strawberries.

living room, and complain about how much your damn back hurts. It's all worth the effort, I swear, because there are few things greater than the satisfaction of imagining something and then making it real.

Here's what we did, and by "we" I mean mostly Julie:

Paid to have the yard graded, steps installed, and raised beds for tomato plants built.

When she moved in, the yard was a tumbledown riot of knotweed partially obscuring the ruins of a brick coal shed. Julie's pal Zoe, a landscape designer and contractor, fired up the skid loader and created two flat spaces separated by a hill that stretches across the middle of the yard. She called in help to build raised cedar-plank beds to plant tomatoes, and cinder block stairs connecting the upper and lower levels. This was a big expense—\$2,000 to \$3,000—but necessary to establish the yard's basic form and foundation.

Saved the brick and other detritus, such as old plumbing pipes, to repurpose later.

One of Julie's core ideas, with any landscape, is that you should use as much of the existing material on the site as possible. Minimize or even eliminate the stuff that goes to a landfill. It saves time and money, and it's environmentally responsible.

Planted the hill to prevent erosion.

First, we grew radishes from seed. They're cheap, spring up fast, and last a good long while. You can even eat them, and so can the rabbits. Another

year we tried clover, which turned out to be a mistake—the roots grew deep and were tough to dig out the following year. On the up side, the plants loosened up the dense clay soil. In years three and four, we planted "zinnia hill." The low cost and profusion of color turned out to be the epitome of cheap and cheerful, a favorite phrase of Julie's. Bonus: She saves and replants the seeds the following year, and the butterflies and hummingbirds drawn to the flowers put on a show.

Installed a tree grove on the lower tier.

Sweet bay magnolias and tulip poplars planted in a cluster provide a visual and physical buffer. Julie says the trees "tuck in" the yard. They also block the view of the UVA hospital. The vegetable beds are situated on the other half of the lower tier, leaving open space to let in sunlight and let you see the sky.

Put in the lawn.

We splurged on sod from a farm in Somerset. Instant lawn! But over the years, what was once a perfect green carpet has become a mix of clover, crabgrass, and who knows what else. Who cares? It's a flat patch of green that anchors the upper tier, and gives Julie's little white poodle a place to leave fragrant little presents.

Planted the black locust grove.

This was a key move, and one that made me understand Julie's basic organizing idea: Establish the middle and then "paint" around the edges. In this case, we put in 40 black locust trees

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along the southern fence line of the upper tier. We used whips, or bare-root specimens, ordered from a nursery in the state of Washington. We amended the soil with compost, peat moss, and mulch. Just one seedling died, and after two years the trees have created a green wall that sways in the wind, provides shade, and increases privacy. Talk about being “tucked in.”

Created the rubble garden.

The bricks and other “junk” that we’d moved to the side? We lugged them up the hill and scattered them at the base of the locust trees. Saved a lot of money (no need to buy mulch), though all of the lifting and schlepping and brick tossing made me hit the Advil hard.

Realized the dream of a plunge pool.

It’s just a galvanized trough. Julie bought it at Southern States. We laid down a few wooden pallets to form a boardwalk that leads to the tub. It sits in the shade of the poplar and magnolia grove. After a day of working your butt off in the hot sun, a cold plunge is heavenly.

Anchored the north side of the upper tier.

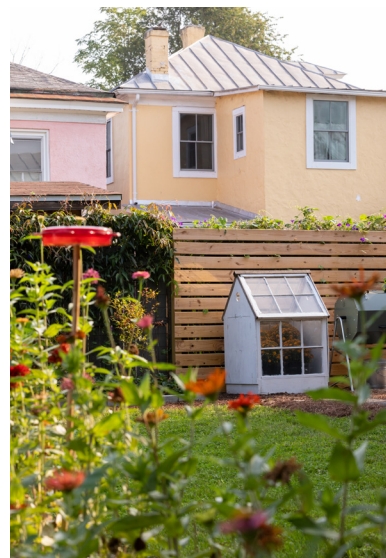
We needed a counterpoint across the lawn to provide balance opposite the locust grove, soften up the northern edge, and add more buffering. The solution is a bed bordered by cinder blocks and filled with fence-climbing clematis, blueberry bushes, and strawberry plants—a tri-level composition. Didn’t get to eat a single blueberry, though. The birds beat us to it.

Paid to fence in the work yard, add stairs off the back porch, and install the outdoor shower.

This was another major move, one that Julie had been drawing (and redrawing, over and over again) for a couple of years. Our pal Don, a skilled craftsman, built a fence along three quarters of the driveway and closed up the end with a galvanized steel gate. There’s still enough room outside the gate for Julie to park. But now the previously underused driveway has become a work yard, with a potting bench and plenty of room for garbage and recycling cans as well as gardening tools and other stuff. Everyone needs a place to put “stuff.” Don made the outdoor shower, using metal plumbing pipes and connectors, based on a simple design by Julie. She bought a solar water heater online. Don bolted it to a pallet. Next, Julie will make canvas panels to enclose the shower. The back stairs are made of concrete block to match those that lead from the lawn to the poplar and magnolia grove.

Built a small greenhouse.

It’s kind of a folly, but it cost less than \$125 in materials, including antique windows I found on Facebook Marketplace. I’m decent at carpentry,



Shaded by a grove of tulip poplars and sweet bay magnolias, the plunge pool is a galvanized-steel tub from Southern States; the tiny greenhouse adds an architectural detail that references the neighbor’s houses; with water heated by a solar unit bought online, the outdoor shower is made of plumbing pipes and connectors purchased at Lowes; in the black locust grove, the ground is covered with bricks from an old coal shed and other detritus found on-site.

try, but it took a group effort to make the thing. I doff my cap and bow to Don, Julie’s neighbor Edward, and her friend and former student Karl Jon, who also created the CAD diagram so you can see how the greenhouse comes together. It now serves as a focal point at the end of the raised stone path.

Oh, right—the stone path!

This took two or three weekends to build. We dug shallow trenches, installed a wooden border with one-by-six-inch boards secured by wooden stakes, and then filled in the base of the walkway with stone dust from Allied Concrete Co., on Harris Street. The treads were a gift from Julie’s old friend Alexander Kitchin, of Fine Concrete, who was unloading unused inventory before he moved his shop. Julie obsessively positioned the

slabs and tapped them into place with a rubber mallet.

Added four more trees and pine straw as finishing touches to the upper tier.

As the school year approached, Julie turned her attention away from gardening to preparing to teach. Our last push really just took a couple of hours, planting four tupelo (also known as black gum) trees along the back of the house and covering the ground with long-needle pine straw. In time, the tupelos will provide shade and a partial shroud for the outdoor shower. After many years, they will grow to 50 to 60 feet, and the garden—including inevitable additions and revisions—will mature. In a decade, the landscape will have changed dramatically, but we’re in no hurry. We’ll be happy to witness its gradual transformation.