

ZONE 05

Location: Chicago, Illinois

Yard size: 25 x 35 feet

Established: 1995

After living in cramped city apartments, I moved with my husband and two children into our first home: an 1893 farmhouse on the north side of Chicago. Once I got my hands in the dirt there was no turning back. It didn't matter that the house needed painting, the roof needed fixing, or the gang kids on our street corner needed reprimanding; my energy was focused on the wildly overgrown front lawn. My goal was to replace the browning, brittle grass and sadly drooping bushes with an exuberant, eye-catching, densely textured vegetable garden that had visual interest through the seasons, making this precious land as productive and efficient as possible.

I observed the sun exposure, studied the space, drew diagrams, and developed a design featuring a maze created by paths and beds that leads to the center of the garden. I used scavenged bricks to build the raised beds, cobblestones for the maze's paths, and cedar for the trellis, which supports the tomatoes, hardy kiwi, and grape vines and maximizes the use of the space. I continue to build up the soil with kitchen scraps, grounds from coffeehouses, and compost from manure from city horse stables.

What was once a wasted plot of barren soil is now abundant with vines of black raspberries, blueberries, grapes, hardy kiwis, loganberries, and currants. Vegetables include kale, peppers, beans, lettuce, arugula, Jerusalem artichokes, and tomatoes. Basil, sage, savory, chives, lavender, tarragon, parsley, rosemary, oregano, and lemongrass represent the herbs. Not only has my garden been a great source of nourishment for my mind and body, but it also has been a draw for insects, birds, and neighbors! People passing by seem to notice how the garden changes through the seasons. Our urban vegetable garden has become a neighborhood destination.

I cannot imagine a life where I am not able to sink my hands in the dirt and witness the drama of the annual cycle of a seed turning into a plant, which grows a vegetable, which creates more seeds. The garden grounds me, and as an artist and a cook, it connects these two aspects of myself. Sometimes tending it feels like the most important thing that I do. Oh, and did I mention that I also have a backyard?

– Barbara Cooper

