

How green and veggie beautiful is your garden?

Small white flowers, blue-black berries, golden-orange leaves, vivid red stalks—hearing Caitlin Black describe the seasons of a blueberry bush makes you want to go out and plant your whole yard with them. Black and her husband, Owen, are partners in Aloe Designs, a company that creates gardens for people who not only care about their own patch but about the planet at large.

"Our approach in the last year and a half has been green gardening," says Black, explaining that this includes avoiding synthetic fertilizers and embracing waterwise gardening strategies such as thoughtful irrigation and rain barrels. She figures that not starting with a plan is also antigreen. (She reckons that the cost of calling in a professional right at the start soon pays for itself.)

These aren't your typical garden planners. In fact, Black suggests browsing their Web site (www.aloedesigns.com/) before you contact them, to see if the fit feels right. For instance, if you like to cram your front yard with purple petunias and one-up the neighbours with forced scarlet geraniums, the relationship might not work. Black is no fan of those flats of colourful annuals that crowd garden centres and the outsides of Safeways this time of year. "They're a huge drain on the environment," she says. "It takes all this energy to grow them in greenhouses. The alternative for us is edibles. Yes, they'll be done at the end of the summer, but you reap the benefits." Instead of impatiens, she

suggests planting herbs. Fill containers with lettuces now; in August, start planting Swiss chard and kale. "Vegetables are beautiful," Black says.

"For beginner gardeners, edibles can be really scary," she says, but for evidence of how easy they are, she points to the veggies schoolkids are growing at the Terranova Schoolyard Project in Richmond, where she volunteers once a week. "It's educating people from the get-go," she says of Aloe's approach. "There's no such thing as a no-maintenance project, [but] we can create low-maintenance." Projects have included an urban farmhouse, balconies, rooftops, and the yards of those who, as the Web site states, are "committed to sourcing organic and sustainable resources".

The Blacks' own outdoor space has the same feel as the interior of their Main Street townhouse, its living area furnished simply with a grey-green L-shaped sofa, bookshelves, vintage finds, and a copy of *Dwell* on the coffee table. A south-facing, asymmetrical 50 square metres, the garden proves that growing edibles needn't mean stick-straight lines. The patio is covered with paving stones separated by river rocks, so that rain runs straight into the earth. If you have space, Black recommends installing an underground irrigation system hooked up to rain barrels. You should definitely have a composter, she says, either the traditional kind or a worm composter. They have two, customized with taps to drain off "worm tea", a concentrated natural fertilizer, for their genuinely green lawn.

Urban Living Angela Murrills



If you want a pretty and planet-friendly garden, Aloe Designs' Caitlin and Owen Black recommend planting potted herbs, blueberry bushes, and striking veggies like Swiss chard along with petunias.

The approach is less edible garden than edibles used decoratively and integrated with other plants. In one bed, fennel, rosemary, and santolina cohabit with daffodils, hyacinths, and a sweet-smelling daphne. A pergola will be planted with runner beans, and potted perennial herbs edge the patio. At the end of the garden in three raised vegetable beds of different heights, peas have already sprouted, scarlet-stemmed chard overwintered, and salad greens planted patchwork style are starting to emerge. Raspberry canes stand along the back fence. On the far side, in the laneway, are an espaliered apple tree and narrow, raised beds for potatoes, beets, and garlic, all underground crops to prevent unauthorized harvesting.

Black says that some clients have kids who need space to play and—get 'em young—their own small veggie garden. While foodies love the idea of growing your own, "Lots of people downtown don't even cook. So we'll do grasses, euphorbia..." She says succulents are a good annual option that can be brought indoors in winter. Even the hot, dry conditions of a south-

facing high-rise balcony don't faze her: "Any Mediterranean plant like lavender, rosemary, or sedum can handle intense heat." Gardening this way means opting for the gradual visual shift of perennials over the *ker-pow!* summer-long impact of hot-pink petunias. "We want to see that change," Black says, pointing out how, in her garden, herbaceous plants live out their annual life cycle against "the bones of the evergreens".

Somehow subtle colours seem far more in tune with modern interior design. "One trend we tend to implement," she says, "is plants that add sculptural element and texture...your space needs to be functional. People are spending more time outdoors," she adds. This means not choosing cheap, plastic outdoor furniture that will eventually wind up in the landfill, but opting for long-lasting pieces that, if made of wood, come from companies that support sustainable harvesting. The Blacks recently crafted their own table out of reclaimed cedar, with an aluminum base to match an inset trough meant to hold growing lettuces. They call it the "harvest table". ♦

CHIC OF THE WEEK

> BY ANGELA MURRILLS

Using kids at play on a merry-go-round as a source of power is just one of the bright ideas at SWELL 2008, an ecodesign exhibit that's part of 30 Days of Sustainability. Other innovations being presented include the LifeStraw portable water purifier, which lets people safely drink directly from rivers, and a program aimed at closing the digital divide between rich and poor by providing low-cost laptops to children. The exhibit runs until May 10 at the Pendulum Gallery in the HSBC Building (885 West Georgia Street). Hours are Monday to Wednesday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Thursday and Friday, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.; and Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.