

TEXT
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labour of love

Their backyard may be tiny, but these Vancouver-based landscape designers maximize every square inch. Here's how.

Homeowners Caitlin and Owen Black and their daughter, Lucie, spend many nights in the garden, harvesting edibles and admiring blooms. **OPPOSITE:** Herbs, such as rosemary and parsley, grow in small pots along the patio, where they can easily be snipped for cooking or garnishing right in the dining area.





many seasoned gardeners would find it impossible to fit this much function

into such a small property. For eight years, Caitlin and Owen Black, principals of Vancouver's Aloe Designs, have been cultivating their 4.5-by-12-metre urban backyard into a well-planned space that includes raised edible beds, a long perennial border and a patio for cooking, dining and lounging.

The task of turning an overgrown, weedy patch into a highly productive garden has been an inspiring and satisfying challenge – and a job that never ends. For a couple that spends all day, every day, planning and installing gardens, could they ever suffer from garden fatigue? Apparently not. “When we actually get to carve out time for our own space, it really rejuvenates us and builds our confidence,” says Caitlin. “The best ideas come to us when we least expect them.”

Early in the planning stage, Caitlin and Owen knew the yard needed to have specific functions: Growing as much food as possible was a high priority, as were areas for cooking and entertaining. So the small plot was delineated into

five different sections. They started by replacing the existing patio to make it suitable for dining and cooking, and worked out from there, planting raised vegetable beds where the sun was strongest. Now a good crop of various greens (like lettuce, spinach and watercress), root vegetables (like carrots, beets and garlic), tomatoes and beans grows every summer. Herbs (like rosemary, mint and thyme) also grow in pots on the patio. And on one side of the garden, a lush border filled with perennials adds interest, colour and texture, while at the far end a small storage shed that Owen built from salvaged materials sits in a dark, poorly drained back corner.

With three-year-old daughter Lucie running around and needing space to play, and her sibling due to arrive this fall, her parents are now embarking on a minor update that will see the addition of a sandbox. And that's not all that's bound to change: As days grow longer and it's light out until 9 p.m., the couple enjoys “power maintenance and transplanting sessions,” says Caitlin. “Honestly, some days we sit out here and want to design the whole thing all over again!” Looks like there's no sign of exhaustion for this designing duo.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Owen built a small storage shed from alder siding found on his dad's property, Douglas fir flooring from a house demo and cedar off-cuts from a client's fence project; Japanese-type herbaceous peony (*Paeonia lactiflora* 'Bowl of Beauty'); raised beds make it easy for young Lucie to harvest food without trampling plants; pushing hardiness zones to the max, the perennial bed includes Mexican Agave americana, Mexican-orange (*Choisya ternata*) and a Teddy Bear southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora* 'Southern Charm'); California lilac (*Ceanothus integerrimus* var. *californicus*); fresh basil is always at hand.




garden stars

SIZE: 4.5 by 12 metres (irregular) **ZONE:** 8 **ORIENTATION:** South **CONDITIONS:** Hot and sunny **GROWING SEASON:** March to November **GARDEN FOCUS:** A mix of raised vegetable beds, a perennial border and cooking and entertaining areas **YEARS GARDENING:** 8 years here **GARDENING MUST-HAVE:** For Caitlín, a kneeling pad and a pair of good-quality secateurs; for Owen, an edger, a stackable worm composter and a cold beer in hand

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ways to make the most of a small urban garden

1. Know what you can manage: Opt for low-maintenance plants if you lack time.
2. Plant upward using vines and espaliered fruit trees where space is really tight but green is desired.
3. Make sure the patio is big enough for comfortable seating and entertaining.
4. Include edible plants in herbaceous borders.
5. Plant small trees to strategically block unsightly views of neighbouring houses and increase privacy.



The fence was given a modern facelift with horizontal tongue-and-groove alder cladding. A perennial border along the side of the yard includes California lilac (*Ceanothus integerrimus* var. *californicus*), Hebe hybrids, English lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia* cvs.), silver-leaved New Zealand daisy bush (*Brachyglottis greyi*), wandering Chilean iris (*Libertia peregrinans*) and Agapanthus hybrids.