

City Plot Is a Showcase

This small suburban Philadelphia garden is a series of spaces that form one cohesive oasis.



This part of the garden features a large koi pond with a waterfall sheeting off a flat rock, the raked tranquility garden, bonsai and a hand-stained bamboo fence.



Sharee Solow, PCH, ASLA and landscape designer extraordinaire with KK the cat.

Down a quiet, tree-lined street in Elkins Park, a suburb of Philadelphia, there is a treasure tucked in among the façade of quaint Colonial and Victorian homes. It belongs to Sharee Solow, PCH, ASLA and landscape designer extraordinaire who has transformed her nondescript city plot into a showcase of “this is what you can do with your space!”

When Sharee and her husband first moved in, the property was a typical city yard with a small grass strip along the sidewalk and some overgrown and ratty looking shrubs including yews and barberry. It was the same for the back of her property. She began to put her stamp on the house, inside and out. She began by ripping out the front, including the grass strip, and transforming it into a multi-season garden, attracting a multitude of pollinators. Since her home isn't quite level with the street, Sharee was able to build a small bog garden with found rock and stone.

The bog garden is filled with a colorful riot of pitcher plant (*Sarracenia* spp.) cultivars, with charming names such as ‘Love Bug’, ‘Red Bug’, ‘Purpetrator’ and ‘Doodlebug’. With their different heights, it creates a pipe organ effect. You will also find *Drosera filiformis*, a carnivorous plant that looks like a short ornamental grass. It is surrounded by hardy rock garden plants including ice plant (*Delosperma* ‘White Nugget’), *Lewisia* spp.

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Above left: The sound of water enhances the tranquility of the garden. Above right: The dwarf ninebark Little Devil™ (*Physocarpus opulifolius* Little Devil™) has dark foliage, pinkish-white flowers and exfoliating bark.

and *Sedum album* 'Athens'. Just a couple of steps away is the dwarf Little Devil™ ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius* Little Devil™) with its dark foliage, pinkish-white flowers and exfoliating bark. Hedge maple (*Acer campestre*) and Japanese maple 'Linearilobum' (*Acer palmatum* 'Linearilobum') have a home there too. Tucked under the trees and shrubs are lilies (*Lilium* spp.), hosta, oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*), bell flowers (*Campanula* spp.) and a small Hinoki cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana').

Clambering up the front porch is a climbing pink rose that threatens to become a beanstalk someday. The porch, with its gingerbread trim, is home to a cornucopia of plants and hanging baskets. Containers are part of the design too. A color combination of blues and yellows in a Monet-blue window box stands out like the perfect gift. All of this is just on 150 square feet, or about the size of a bedroom!

At the end of the driveway, just a car's length long, there is a wooden fence and gate. As you open the gate, you are transported across the oceans to the Far East. There is a stone patio with a shaded table to enjoy some refreshments as well as the view. And what a view it is — featuring a large koi pond with a waterfall sheeting off a flat rock, a raked tranquility garden, bonsai and a hand-stained bamboo fence. There is a bonsai

gingko garden in a dish as well as many others scattered around that Sharee has either started or grown over the years. The backyard takes advantage of a shared view, the right of way at the back that belongs to SEPTA, the local public transportation system. As a result, the yard looks like it extends far beyond the property line. An old mirror is anchored between two trees at the back creating the illusion of depth. The trees are actually held together by a gnarly tree branch that is attached by bolts giving it a bonsai look of its own.

Since the property is mostly shaded, the garden is filled with shade lovers such as hostas, hakone grass (*Hakonechloa macra*), epimedium and heuchera, along with Japanese maples, bamboos and tree peonies.

Then there are the little treasures — a handmade and a hand-cut bell, made by a friend, a not so small gong and a Thai serenity temple. There is also a special guardian of the garden, KK, the resident feline who patrols the gardens front and back.

What makes Sharee's garden even more surprising is the size of her space in the back, just a mere 50 by 30 feet.

So the next time you complain that you just don't have the space, look at Sharee's garden. 🐾

Denise Schreiber is the infamous Mrs. Know It All of The Organic Gardeners on KDKA radio and author of Eat Your Roses.



Top: An old mirror is anchored between two trees at the back creating the illusion of depth. The trees are actually held together by a gnarly tree branch that is attached by bolts. Left: This Hinoki cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana') is covered with rose petals. Above: KK the cat enjoys the raked tranquility garden.