



Landscape design with legs

Sustainable gardens at FrogSong are a real leap forward!

by Annie Spiegelman

A housing community where 30 residents share weekly meals, govern by consensus, resolve conflict through dialogue, dry laundry on clotheslines, compost food scraps and cultivate an organic community garden? *What a bunch of socialists!* Socialism and sustainability are milking the spotlight in Obamaland, so I decided to tag along with the North Bay chapter of the APLD (Association of Professional Landscape Designers) on its private tour of the earth-friendly garden at FrogSong, a unique co-housing property in Cotati.

There are roughly two acres of prolific perennials, shrubs, fruit trees and vegetables surrounding the townhouses at FrogSong. These gardens were designed by award-winning landscape designer Patrick Picard, owner of Equinox Landscape, and Penny Livingston of the Regenerative Design Institute. Both designers specialize in creating ecologically friendly landscapes that work with Mother Nature, not against her. Their creations don't require a shed full of chemical warfare to combat disease and pests. They know the secret to a healthy, spectacular, yet low-maintenance yard begins by having microorganisms and earthworms partying like rock stars underground, decomposing organic matter to feed your plants. These organisms are "your people."

(Let them do all the work so you can chill...or tweet that you're at Peet's. Again. Get a life!)



"We keep rainwater on site in swales and ponds. We use local nurseries and suppliers and we build soil by doing lots of sheet mulching," says Picard. "Food is interspersed throughout the ornamental garden. We also incorporate plants that attract beneficial insects and fix nitrogen to increase fertility. We grow plants such as dill and comfrey because they extract minerals from the soil." Picard's design at FrogSong primarily follows permaculture principles: aiming for a site that sustains itself by mimicking natural ecologies. It combines the best of natural landscaping and edible landscaping. It also strives to attract wildlife habitat, conserve water and use plants that are appropriate for the climate.

According to Picard, the garden took about three years to mature. There are dozens of fruit trees blended in among the many ornamental plants on the property, many of which are unusual heritage varieties. The roughly 50 adult residents, along with a plethora of children, living at FrogSong take turns maintaining sections of

the garden. Each homeowner owns about 3 percent of the land. Residents adopt certain sections (called Zones of Love) and care for that section throughout the season. When asked what the hardest part of communal gardening is, Picard shares, "There's a lot of letting go of control. You have to trust that your neighbor will follow through, and so far, so good!" Many of the residents had not gardened in the past but quickly grew into die-hards, proving once again just how contagious the gardening bug is. Fo sheezy!

Speaking of hortiholics...many of the landscape designers on the tour were graduates of Alameda County's Bay Friendly Gardening Program (www.BayFriendly.org), which stresses the importance of conserving water, protecting local watersheds and contributing to a healthy community. "More and more, clients are sensitive to environmentally friendly design," says Marin landscape designer Cathy Edger. "The Bay Friendly landscaper course did an excellent job of showing designers and contractors how to design and install gardens that are sustainable. It showed us sustainable techniques that minimize the use of pesticides, herbicides and runoff to the bay. Wasteful practices can sometimes even increase the cost of installation."

Cynthia Sumner, president of the North Bay district of the APLD, is pleased to find that more and more of her clients are concerned about toxins and want to provide habitat for birds, butterflies and beneficial insects. They're also asking for safe, clean, edible gardens. "One thing APLD recognizes is that we are not only designers," says Sumner. "We have a role as educators and a responsibility to help our clients [and installers] get on board with transitioning from conventional landscaping practices to ones that are sustainable. We're starting to see a movement to 're-purpose' the garden, to go beyond sustainability and look at the real potential we have to fight climate change right outside our own doors. Aesthetics and ecology are equally being considered."

A landscape designer can be extremely helpful, especially if you're a novice gardener or you've just moved into a new home with a huge, daunting yard during California's third year of drought. A designer will work within your budget to provide not only an artistic eye but will also help you choose the most appropriate elements, materials and plants for your site. Trust me. I learned the hard way. You'll save years of frustration, natural resources and money on plants that die on you. In the biz we refer to this as "horticultural homicide." ●