

Lower Mitcham Food Garden

After a call from Sam and Sarah we visited their Lower Mitcham home to discover a beautiful, big back yard area. The previous owners had covered this back yard with rose bushes, but now it was an uneven expanse of lawn that Sam had to mow regularly. Like many smart, young home owners, he quickly came to the conclusion that the lawn space could be renovated into something a lot more productive.



Another blank canvas – and a rather large one!

Around the fence perimeter, a row of large screening bushes provided some privacy and the two neglected fruit trees provided an occasional bowl of apricots between them. We all agreed that the perimeter bushes would remain.

The potential to renovate this large space into a very productive food garden was exciting. Sam and Sarah were keen to grow all their own fruit and veggies so we came up with a design for the entire area including a fruit orchard, vines on trellises, blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, chook yards and of course the main veggie garden, all integrated into a sustainable yet beautiful foodscape.

Sam and Sarah recognised the potential but were a bit overwhelmed by our total makeover foodscape! After discussing their budget and their fresh food requirements, we agreed to scale it back and convert half the back yard into the productive area.

Our final design included a small orchard (two rows of fruit trees) across one half of the back fence and a veggie garden between the orchard and the shed. This would leave Sam and Sarah room to expand the initial food garden into other areas of the yard as they needed.

Starting work

Trenches were dug first so that irrigation pipes could be buried underground and connected to the tap. From the buried pipes, irrigation lines were connected to the spots where the garden beds would be placed. This infrastructure was essential to get in at the start as we knew the heavy digger would be rolling over the area, making it much harder to dig.

Roger was keen to get the garden beds made next so we got to work making the four x 3 metre beds that would fit together into the L-shaped pattern. A smaller bed, only 40cm high was also made – this would be for strawberries.



The five beds are made and waiting to be put in place. Notice the irrigation pipes sticking up out of the ground where the beds will be located.

Challenges

One of our logistical challenges was how to get 14 tons of soil and gravel from the front driveway to the back garden. With only a narrow gate and steps from the driveway up onto the back patio, we weren't overly fond of the idea of hundreds of arduous wheelbarrow trips across this area. And we couldn't drive the digger up, over and down the steps of their patio decking multiple times either.

Roger had a great idea! He asked and got permission to remove one of the back shed panels. Sam then moved the boxes and contents of the shed to make a clear path for the digger from the driveway, through the shed, to the back yard, and we were set to go!



Where there's a will, there's a way. Roger is dismantling a panel from the back of the shed so we can more easily move soil, gravel, equipment and materials from the front driveway to the back yard.

Prevention is better than cure

With so many large neighbouring trees, we decided to lay tree root barriers underneath each bed as well as weed control mat over the entire garden area. This is important to prevent the root invasion from large trees that we often see in vegetable gardens. The trees detect the deliciously moist soil and send their roots over to suck out all the moisture and nutrition. Great for the tree, not so good for the veggie garden. Once those roots are in, there is no way to remediate the damage apart from starting over.



For this job, root barriers go in first and then weed control mat will cover the entire area.

Now you would think that we'd put all the garden beds in place at this point, but not so. In order to navigate the digger in and around the beds to fill them with soil, we had to put two beds in place and fill them with soil first, then place and fill the small round bed in the centre, then finally place the other two and fill them last.

One of our other challenges was getting the beds level on uneven sloping ground. This had to be addressed prior to laying down the weed control mat so that when the beds were first positioned they sat pretty close to level along their top surface. Once in place, we were then able to adjust them slightly to be perfectly level before filling them with soil.



The final bed is being put into place...

With all the garden beds in place and filled with soil, we moved on to the next step: constructing a border to contain the gravel.



The border is in and Sally has started planting out the garden. Just waiting on the gravel now...



In the meantime, down the back, we planted the little orchard with six fruit trees and connected up the irrigation lines for them.

With a bit of soil left over and a small vacant spot, we created an extra feature: a mound of soil to grow rambling vines like pumpkins and melons. There's always room for one more plant!!!



A rather odd looking irrigation pipe. It will eventually be laid flat over the mound where pumpkins and melons will be planted.



Above is the garden on the final day, newly planted out.



And here is the garden, barely 2 months after planting.

With a stylish and highly functional food garden like this, you get the best of two worlds: an abundance of beautiful, organic food and a gorgeous back yard that is a delight to be in... a lovely new age food garden.