



Laura Ley & Barry Kern's Haven for Birds & Butterflies



Laura Ley and Barry Kern are city gardeners who have created a colorful urban oasis on Bloomington's Near West Side on the site of an old orchard. "When we purchased the house in 1982, there were seven trees that quickly died, a dog pen in the back yard, a grape arbor, and some zebra grass," Laura recalls. "Barry concentrated on remodeling the house, as he specializes in restoring older homes, and I started the garden in the back by planting masses of daffodils. Then I just focused on growing vegetables for about seven years."

As it is for many gardeners, the creation of a garden using plants remembered from childhood was the initial motivation for Laura. She started planting old-fashioned

annuals grown from seeds inherited from her grandmother—e.g. *Nicotiana* and yarrow. "I started sowing seeds of zinnias and marigolds for color among the vegetables, and enjoyed it so much that I expanded my flower repertoire," Laura says. "I purchased some of my best plants from Lee Jones, Linda Chapman, John Bavender, Mike Salem, and Don Dunkerly at the Bloomington Community Farmer's Market.

"I discovered the benefit of planting annual self-seeders such as globe amaranth, balsam, four-o'clocks, moss roses, and *Cleome* that return year after year. I also grew to depend on perennials such as *Geranium* 'Rozanne' and cone flowers that bloom for a long time," she continues.

1. The dense plantings and the artful combinations of color and fragrance provide a whimsical experience of sensory affects. The narrow paths provide opportunities for close-up inspection of the blossoms.

2. Barry specializes in houseplants that winter indoors but spend the summer outdoors on one side of the house. Laura is the creator of the annual and perennial beds. They enjoy working together in the garden and have done every bit of the work themselves.

3. A *Spiraea* shrub with varying shades of pink blooms is combined with a *Sedum* on the left that will bloom in the fall, and a perennial *Geranium* on the right, which bloomed earlier in the spring.

4. The castor-oil plant, with colorful palmate leaves, grows quite tall and is a striking accent as it towers above its neighbors. Though beautiful, this plant is poisonous.

5. An island bed by the garage is edged by geodes and includes an array of self-seeding annuals as well as perennials.

6. Barry created the fountain. Not only is it visually attractive, it provides a soothing auditory dimension that melds with the sound of insects and birdsong.

"Friends gave us geodes to edge the beds near the house, and we planted a dark-leaved Norwegian maple that now anchors the entire garden."

The elongated back garden stretches past the garage until it ends in a steep incline that allows for a backdrop wall of creeping phlox and an old-fashioned rose on a fence. The gardens farthest from the house are punctuated with statuesque clumps of perennials such as queen of the prairie; native Culver's root and Joe Pye weed; and annual *Celosia* and purple fountain grass.

Barry constructed a water feature in the far back corner, creating a dramatic backdrop for the dark foliage of taro "Black Magic," while Mediterranean plants such as lavender and rosemary thrive on the nearby dry banks. Laura realized the need for height in the distant beds, and repeats clumps of castor-oil plant (which is poisonous but striking), tall daylily 'Autumn Minuet,' Mexican sunflower, and native cup plant, which holds water for the birds to enjoy.

At one point in the evolution of this garden, Laura started to focus on fall bloomers and added various types of *Sedum*, *Aster*, golden rod, blackberry lilies, and *Helenium*. Another phase of development included planting flowering shrubs that bloom at different times and are low maintenance. She lined the side of the garden that abuts a lane with *Abelia*, 'Miss Kim' lilac, and 'Lime-light,' 'Little Lime,' 'Oakleaf,' and 'Pinky Winky' hydrangeas.

This garden is a haven for birds and butterflies, but chicken-wire cages covering newly planted annuals deter rabbits in the spring. Motion detectors set off alarms to confuse deer and the raccoons. Laura spends time in the garden every day during the growing season and keeps a garden journal. "We both enjoy the garden each day, and even when we are traveling I am on the lookout for new plants," she says. ✨