

Gardener To Gardener

Linda Larson of Larson's Landing seasonal recreational vehicle park is located along the Missouri River west of Yankton. Larson is active in Missouri Valley Master Gardeners. "We have eighteen acres of trees, shrubs, vegetables and flower beds," Larson said. Her tips for large area gardening may have application to the homeowner as well.

- Within the eighteen acres, our planting areas range from large beds to small beds and contain trees, shrubs, flowers, and vegetables. My assistant Tom and I use a three-pronged cultivator for breaking and aerating the soil during the entire growing season. This tool is also good for weeding. We have a diamond shaped hoe that is very sharp and it is easy to cut in a weed and pull it out. We have several sizes of pruning tools that we use for plants, trees and shrubs.

- We have several staging areas for growing ground covers and some other plants. We have installed an irrigation system that covers all areas. The water is supplied from our well. We check the systems daily for leaks, coverage, and plugged sprinkling heads due to sand. This irrigation system has saved us from dragging hoses throughout the park as in past years.

- We have developed a way to economically mulch and fertilize our plants with our compost. Each fall we put leaves into a separate mulch pile. The other mulch pile includes grass clippings from the yards. Throughout the growing season we use our loader to turn the piles. Without rain during the season, we water down the piles to help bacteria break down plant materials into compost. We try not to put anything but clean grass clippings with no weeds into the pile. We mix retail mushroom mulch with the leaves and get great results.

- Our centrally located garage has four utility vehicles for all our supplies. Each vehicle is supplied with the tools, irrigation supplies and whatever we may need for the day. Each morning we have a short meeting to assign tasks and distribute tools and supplies needed. We have learned that this short meeting with our grounds crew has saved us time and stress.



View of the backyard from the roof of the Bowers' earth home shows the three curving terraces, each about ninety feet long rising about thirty feet above the back door entrance. Even in early fall, roses and other perennials display foliage.

PHOTO BY BRENDA K. JOHNSON

Plant Exchange

Adding A Personal Touch

Share tips from your plant experience, give us a tour of your plant site, or send your questions related to outdoor or indoor plants to news@yankton.net Attn: Brenda Johnson or write to P&D, 319 Walnut St, Yankton, SD 57078, Attn: Brenda Johnson.

BY BRENDA K. JOHNSON
P&D Correspondent

Q: How is your yard a reflection of your interests?

A: "We try to explore less conventional approaches; less traditional plants and try to think outside the box," JoEllen said. Jim and JoEllen Bowers' one-of-a kind earth-home front yard and terraced back yard in Yankton were featured on the 2012 Cramer-Kenyon Fall Garden/Landscaping Tour. Jim is a retired biology professor at Mount Marty College and JoEllen is a home health and hospice nurse. Their earth home and yard of hills and slopes was designed by Larry Lewallen, a landscape architect for the former Gurney Seed & Nursery. We visit during vegetable harvest in September.

The hill in their backyard rises at least thirty feet upward from their back door with at least a forty-five degree slope. Prompted by concern for aesthetically beautiful but bowing fieldstone walls in wet years, Bowers looked for hardscape solutions. Now, with a lot of family labor, the tall, stacked fieldstone walls are replaced with interlocking landscape blocks. Clusters of fieldstone accent the backyard.

Sturdy ninety-foot long landscape block terraces curve with the hillside. Each terrace is about ten feet above the next level with an original forty-five degree slope. "Seventy-four pounds each," Jim said. "The smaller landscape blocks aren't as heavy. When I built the three terraces, I finished the lower level first. Then I used planks to push the wheelbarrow up to the next level (for hauling materials). On the third terrace, I could bring the truck around for materials. You look for the easiest ways to do it."

Another challenge was the base for each wall. "You have to dig down to get the base level," Jim said. "Blocks have to lay level on the gravel. You had to account for change in hill elevation." The top of each terrace has plant beds mainly for perennials.

"When we built the terrace levels we put in water," JoEllen said. "Trying to haul up

hoses was terrible." Now they have taps at each terrace and use splitters with weeping hoses in the beds. "If we didn't have the water here, we wouldn't have had much this year."

ALIKE AND DIFFERENT

Jim's landscape preference resembles a meadow of wildflowers while JoEllen's preference is closer to a peony bed with fieldstone boundaries.

"He'd naturalize the whole yard with wildflowers," JoEllen said. "You wouldn't have to mow it; it would go to seed naturally. I think in terms of flowerbeds. That's where we're different. Now can we make (the yard) like he'd like to see it with some organization to it?" Their plant areas appear to combine or balance both interests.

"(Function) drove the landscaping of the three terraces," JoEllen said. "It was such a hard slope to pull weeds; to get plants that would hold soil. We didn't set out to have a yard full of retaining walls. Designs were borne out of doing something to make the yard functional. We wanted the natural look, so we incorporated that. We kept the bottom edged in fieldstone and have a stairway edged in fieldstone."

Bowers base their landscaping activity on trying to find answers to plant dilemmas not uncommon to most gardeners: What are low maintenance shade plants that grow here and have the most color? For sun and shade? When you have a hill in your yard, what do you do with it? How do you change beds or other planting areas so they are easier to access? How do you achieve bold colors, unique textures, and foliage that will grow but will stay in boundaries? How do you combine natural random style with tidy organized style? How do work at controlling all these dilemmas and stay open to the serendipity of Nature?

"This butterfly bush started to grow early when it got warm early this year," JoEllen said. "It's typical that we cut it back to six or eight inches (while still dormant.) We had a monster bush and it has bloomed and bloomed. It is very fragrant and we found a volunteer butterfly bush (at its base) this year."

JoEllen plants annuals for spots of color around the entrance and other areas in the

yard. "We went to Menches Greenhouse in Avon to look for plants. The verbena we got there has done so well. It gets sun and part sun. When you look for plants to go with others, it takes planning. Sun or shade is the starting point. I think of birds and butterflies and what will attract them. That drives our choices as well as color."

In the backyard butterfly bush, coneflower, hardy hibiscus, clematis, caladiums, yarrow, columbine, autumn joy sedum, asters, Rudbeckia, Stella d'Oro and wine cup day lilies, mums, and shrub roses add color in the terraces.

"We shoot for variety in plants. I look at periodicals such as Birds and Blooms magazine, and the Internet. Many are bitten with Pinterest bug.

I look at tags at the greenhouse. Our daughters are in the early stages of gardening. I don't think either will be vegetable gardeners. They have busy lives but like a pretty landscape."

JOELLEN BOWERS

BOUNTIFUL VEGETABLES IN RAISED BEDS

Bowers are pleased how well vegetables produced on their hilltop location. However hilltops are traditionally hot and dry terrain and this has been a hot, dry summer. Their raised bed vegetable garden is mostly full sun location in the top terrace on a hilltop, over thirty feet above their back door.

Soil in their raised beds may be part of the answer. "Black soil and old cow manure," Jim said. "We don't use purchased fertilizer."

"After we take the vegetables out in the fall, we put leaves down and till them in. Jim's mower mulches and he uses a mulcher outdoor vacuum," JoEllen said. "We try to work in more organic material in the spring if we can, but usually not many leaves are left."

"We got a load of the free Yankton (Transfer Station) city compost and put that on too; about an inch in spring, and tilled that in," he said. "We got enough for next year too."

Other key ingredients to production are providing water as needed and mulching. A water tap is installed near the raised beds. "We use (grass clipping) mulch around the plants and put the weeping hose (from a nearby tap) beneath the mulch," JoEllen said. "That way you don't use as much

water," he said. Their plants are robust in September. It would have been difficult to achieve this quality of growth by hand watering and dragging hoses this season.

"We avoid disease (with the mulch cover). Plants don't get wet," she said.

"This is the first year to have really good peppers," she said. Pepper plants are robust and about waist high. "We have them in full sun. Past years we had them in another bed that gets less sun."

"Asparagus didn't do as well this year," JoEllen said. Their asparagus is in a raised bed with mulch and irrigation. "It had early growth and then was done. Heat really factored into that. We use fish emulsion as fertilizer. We learned that it's best when it is actively growing, so I will be more prompt next year."

Their tomato plants are still laden with fruit. "We've already canned 30-40 jars of salsa," Jim said. "We plant Roma and Celebrity tomatoes."

"We tried a couple of Black Russian heirlooms that someone gave us last year, but they didn't prove out," JoEllen said.

The structure holding the raised beds in place has been renovated because the wood rotted out. "This is composite plastic decking," he said. "We built these. Corners are composite material that came with the decking, that I cut to fit. It works well."

"Rebar cement reinforcement along the length of the beds works well," she said.

"Grape tomatoes are for the grill," Jim said. "Great for shish kabobs. Squash and cucumbers have not done well this year. Beets are ready; we should use the tops. My mother used to do that. Beans are done now."

At this later point of harvest, their garden looks quite tidy. "That's my fault," JoEllen said. "I need borders and confines. I need structure. Would you say that, Jim?"

He agrees and they laugh.

"If you looked at my peony beds, you'd see the edging around them," she added. "I love having raised beds for gardens where you don't have to step in the garden. You don't compact the soil. You can reach it from both sides." They can harvest and weed the beds with the path between two rows of raised beds on this terrace.

"There is a lot of trial and error in the yard. You do the research and sometimes it's not meant to be. We have a marriage of ideas. Jim does the reading and research. Some of it has function; that drives the landscaping."

Plant Exchange: Blog With Us!

This blog is an interactive site for people of our USDA Zone 4-5a region to exchange ideas about plants. Want to read some past Plant Exchange features you missed? Want to share a comment about plants?

- How does a grower in this region extend spinach harvest in fall and spring?

- What are some container plants for dry weather?

- With the skills of local artisans and businesses, how does a Yankton homeowner create custom hardscape for his yard?

- How does a Yankton couple solve backyard hillside landscape issues with persistence, skills, and belay for safety?

- Want to see and read about what's growing and blooming around the United States and elsewhere? "Garden Bloggers Bloom Day" link will show you selections from February 15, 2013.

Check us out at the web address: brendakjohnsonplantexchange.wordpress.com

Dibbles & Bits

- Master Gardener Training 2013 will be offered by South Dakota State University Extension staff with Yankton as a regional site for three hands-on learning days in May. This year, online learning will be combined with the three sessions at the Yankton County Extension Office on Whiting Drive. Topics include care and selection of trees and shrubs, lawn care, vegetable and flower gardening and more. Application and fee deadline is March 27th. Details on website: <http://www.sdstate.edu/sdces/resources/lawn/master-gardeners/> Contact: Mary Roduner, Master Gardener SD Coordinator at (605) 394-1722

- Terrarium glass covers can be expensive. A flea market hanging glass lamp can be positioned onto a plant container that matches the lamp diameter. A recycled fish terrarium with lid works too. www.Garden-GateNotes.com or February 2013

Garden Gate Magazine, in the Yankton Community Library.

- Raised bed gardening is one solution for a site with poor natural soil. Consider parts of a plan before you start. Decide what to plant and light requirements. Seed catalogs can help. Most vegetables grow best in at least eight hours of full sun. Find a location with light requirements. Decide if you want pre-fabricated raised beds or to make your own from wood, deck material or other. Measure and mark for square or rectangular bed. Typically bed is no wider than four feet across for easy reach half way across to tend the plants. Decide on height of bed, allowing for about a foot of soil inside. Trench around the bed. Consider removing or killing existing grass with Roundup within the bed. Put frame in place. Add bags of potting soil and compost. When available, add quality black soil. Add compost each season. Plant seeds. Install soaker hose for watering and mulch lightly with grass clippings once plants have germinated. For more details:

www.ask.com "raised bed gardening"

- Garden Excellence Award winner for the 2012 best American public garden is Springs Preserve in West Las Vegas, Nevada. Honor recognizes their displays and attention to local environment in the Mojave Desert. The January/February issue of Horticulture magazine features Springs Preserve and plants that grow under desert conditions including cactus. See videos at <http://www.springspreserve.org/attractions/gardens.html>

- Plant Heat Zone Rating on plant tags shows the tolerance of plants to heat, just as the USDA Hardiness Zone rating shows plant tolerance to cold. American Horticulture Society recognizes the importance of knowing a plant's heat as well as cold tolerance in selecting plants, so they developed a number rating system. Yankton area is Heat Zone 6-7 because 45-90 days per year are above 86 degrees F. For your Heat Zone Rating: http://www.ahs.org/publications/heat_zone_finder.htm

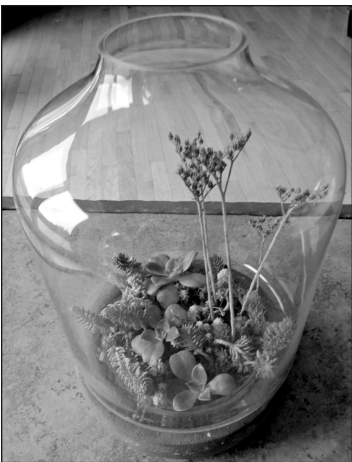


PHOTO BY BRENDA K. JOHNSON

Garden indoors. A terrarium allows you to tend a few plants and enjoy them up close with modest watering and care. Whether you find parts or purchase a terrarium, add easy care plants and miniatures for a theme or stay natural for a personalized garden.

February Plant Tips

Emily Barton is Store Manager of Kopetsky's Ace Hardware, 2404 Broadway Ave. in Yankton. Thanks to Barton for tips anticipating spring. "We stock seeds, peat pots, starter trays, warming mats, and hand tools," Barton said. "Stop and talk to our knowledgeable staff or browse with a warm bag of popcorn free every weekend!"

- February is the perfect time to go through old seeds, plan your garden, and shop for new seeds and bulbs. Shopping early will ensure getting the best selection.

- As days get longer houseplants will start showing signs of new growth and they will need to

be fertilized.

- After last summer's drought, trees and shrubs will need extra watering and fertilizer to be strong and healthy. Most shrubs should also be pruned before they show signs of new growth.

- If you're looking for a reason to get out of the house, February is a good time to repair and paint window boxes, flowerpots, plant holders, and even lawn furniture.

- Gardening tools might need a little TLC before you put them to use this spring. Sharpening, cleaning, and oiling will do the trick to make most tools as good as new.

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