

Side garden sanctuary

By Vanessa Salvia for *The Register-Guard*

Couple's Eugene garden is one of four to be featured on the Garden Conservancy Open Days tour Saturday, July 7



When Rebecca Sams and Buell Steelman, owners of Mosaic Gardens in Eugene and Coos Bay, purchased their home in 2002, its hardscaping consisted of a driveway and sidewalk. “It was a rental property with a steeply sloping, weedy yard and a couple of random walls,” Sams recalls. “The entire back part was concrete and a collection of old sheds.”

The first plants went into the 5,500-square-foot lot over 2003 and 2004. Given the pair’s prior experience at landscaping firms in Texas, they knew what to do.

“We weren’t in a rush, and because it was ours, we had time to think about the unusual structure of the space and to think about inventive solutions,” Sams says.

About a third of the property is a small vegetable garden with some fruit trees anchored by a sculpture made by Steelman. The ornamental part is mostly the narrow side garden, and Sams says people are surprised by how much color, texture and purpose the small space holds.

The public will get a chance to view this beautiful garden, along with two others in Eugene and a fourth near Veneta, during the Eugene Garden Conservancy’s Open Day on Saturday, July 7.

Straightforward approach

Most of the space is on the side of the house, so the couple moved the location of the driveway. The side space is long and narrow, so a direct, geometric approach made more sense than trying to fit a meandering pathway into it.

Eugene gardens on tour Saturday, July 7

What: Garden Conservancy's Open Days Program, hosted locally by the Willamette Valley Hardy Plant Group

When: Saturday, July 7, noon to 4 p.m.

Where: Three private gardens in Eugene, one nursery near Veneta:

- Buell Steelman and Rebecca Sams garden, 662 W. 25th Place
- Enright garden, 2050 Monroe St.
- Laurelwood Garden, 2475 Van Ness St.
- Northwest Garden Nursery (hours extended to 6 p.m.), 86813 Central Road, near Veneta

Admission: \$7 per garden. Proceeds support the nonprofit Garden Conservancy and partnering nonprofit groups.

Information: <https://www.gardenconservancy.org/open-days/open-days-schedule/eugene-or-open-day>

“You’re playing with the long, narrow dimension to not make you feel hemmed in, and to emphasize the length of the space,” Sams explains. “In a tight space, using straight lines can actually clarify things and be more powerful to draw you in, whereas a meandering path would have felt forced.”

One key element of the couple’s garden is a stock tank in the center of a circular pea-graveled area with paths leading right to it. The tank, which holds water plants and some fish (which reproduce from a six-for-a-dollar goldfish purchase), is centered on the view from the living room window.

“The property slopes away there, so the living room window sits above it,” says Sams. “That big, 7-foot metal feature pulls the eye down to the garden. Without it, if you look straight out, it would be really easy to look right over it.”

A little bench at the stock tank allows viewers to survey the garden, even if they’re not able to actually walk the path to get there.

The only fences the couple used are of corrugated galvanized metal. Sams says the metal brings a sense of lightness and brightness to the garden. “It makes the space feel brighter and larger than it would if it had the traditional darker wood fence behind it,” she says. “Our deck also has a galvanized railing, we have a galvanized garage door, and there’s a few more stock tanks with bamboo. We’ve used the metal as a color in a way.”

To Sams, the structure of the garden is the heart of it, even when the plants change — as they will and do in most gardens.

In small spaces, Sams says, there’s a tendency for the gardener to want to scale down the garden’s elements. Instead, she says, think abundantly. Use wider paths, larger benches and ample seating to make the space comfortable. “Give humans room in the garden, and I think you will find that if you create enough room to make the space really usable it will be welcoming and comfortable for people,” she says.

Mosaic Gardens owners share how they transformed a narrow, difficult space into ornamental retreat with sculpture, water, edibles and metal accents