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“Don’t Fence Me In”

by Marjorie Harris

The idea of sharing a garden in the city might seem odd since we already share everything around us. But actually taking down fences and being more in each other’s faces than we already are is an idea that’s gaining a lot of ground. The old concept: “It’s MY property” is a mind set that would baffle the likes of Rob James and Cynthia Ravindran. They bought their adjoining 1880s semi-detached houses six years ago. Though enchanted by their fine old houses they were less than pleased with the chain link fences with masses of variegated goutweed that comprised the back yards. When Rob asked a professional what he should do about a backyard of goutweed, the answer was “Move.”

They valiantly set out together to dig up the goutweed and along the way found they had similar tastes not only in houses but in gardens and the way to live. Though Rob had no garden experience, Cynthia has a mother and sister with plants and garden expertise. Unlike Rob, she also has a dog, a husband and two kids. Making a shared garden for two such disparate families became their commitment to rich urban living.

There was no master plan for the garden design but they quickly discovered a similar eye and, voilà, they had a very casual arrangement. “Both people have to have the same taste,” says Rob “or one person will dominate. In our case we shared an aesthetic: eclecticism. For instance she found two 1950’s style chairs and I went out and looked around for a third.” They both picked out the wooden table and chairs.

Cynthia says “We talk on a regular basis and let each other know when we’ll be entertaining and who’s included. Rob enjoys the kids and he’s the one out there putting up the croquet equipment. I’m away for two months in the summer and I know there’s someone here who’ll water my plants and mow the lawn.”

Their first move was to remove most of the chain link fence. Then they constructed two 8 by 10 foot square lattice screens down the property line with a connecting arch halfway and left the whole back end of the yard open. The screens were echoed on Cynthia’s side with a yew hedge in between them.

They have few if any rules since the way they live defines how they use the backyard. The kids (8 and 12) have free reign to play throughout both sides. But, Cynthia says “When they’re playing soccer they have to stay on our side.” They have no rules at all about meals (the dining room table straddles the middle of the back garden) and if one side is eating *au plein air*, they usually expect the other to join in if they want. It’s all very easy. “We respect each other’s way of living.” says Cynthia. “We throw parties together. I like his friends and when he has parties our family can join in or not.” Plants aren’t a problem since they seem to spread them around with their innate good taste wherever they seem to be in the right place.

Temma Gentles and Paul Kay live next door to Victor Levin. They took their fences down 10 years ago and have found out that if you want to live like this you do need rules and you should anticipate what *could* happen. “First you have to define the property lines very carefully.” says Temma “And find out what your city’s by-laws are for fence and set-backs and know what your obligations are.”

Though Rob and Cynthia have gone for a unified look with slightly different plantings, Temma and Paul have headed in the opposite direction. “We have a water feature,” says Temma “A weeping hemlock, the edges of structures such

as decks and his garage along the property line.” That’s what they have in common but each side is very different in every respect.

She feels that to make a shared garden work there has to be a mutual benefit. “We have a feeling of space but each garden is very different in style. It’s like any relationship.” she says “There’s usually one person who doesn’t want to fix the broken tile and gets used to it, and the other who wants it changed immediately.” It would describe the Victor-Temma relationship. But where this project worked was in the mutual benefit department is in the feeling of openness in their views impossible to get otherwise in their crowded downtown neighbourhood.

Rob and Cynthia found out what can happen when there isn’t co-operation between neighbours. They are now faced with what they refer to as the Wall of Shame: a mutual neighbour backing on to their gardens built a so-called bike shed—a humongous affair. They’ve done their best to disguise it with trellis cladding, but it’s taken a mirror, old barn boards, a bedstead, and a fireplace to make it look less hostile. It’s one of those things we put up with in cities though not happily.

In Temma’s case, this was all agreed upon before they began work on the yards. “You either have to have an alpha designer or both of you must have the same taste.” She had the design expertise and contacts (she’s an artist) and Victor was willing to compromise to appease her needs and fears. They made up a written agreement just to express them. For instance when Victor decided to transform his garage into a potter’s studio, just how it should be became a matter of discussion. The whole problem of scale is incredibly important in small downtown gardens and overbuilding or having things out of whack is one of the blights of urban living. Temma was right in being fearful about just how big this building would be. Victor’s concessions were: no windows on her side (he has

skylights instead), a trellis for her vines, an agreed colour (like weathered cedar) for the cladding to harmonize with Temma and Paul's other screens and fences.

The agreement is also a list of what they like and don't like so they could spot the potential trouble areas. One is mess. Victor collects stuff, Temma and Paul are neat. It has to be discussed. There are unwritten rules as well: if you say hello is this a chat time? or just being polite? Temma and Paul feel you have to ask. It's all part of the niceties of communication. And neither side wants to be captive to the other. Then came the thorny questions of meals: if you are both out on your decks at the same time how do you have any privacy? Well, one solution would be to have decks on different level. But in this case since they are on the same level, they use a small birch tree as a natural screen between the two decks. But there are lots of other solutions: a fabric hanging, vines, a trellis.

Costs for the shared parts of the garden are splits in both cases. What's critical is maintaining a sense of privacy yet having the vista no single small city garden affords. Once that's nailed down there aren't many problems. But what if one partner decides they want change or if they up and sell? "If new neighbours weren't compatible," says Cynthia "I'd put my dog on a rope and finish off the back of the garden with more screens right to the back of the yard which is the only place that's completely open."

In going back to some of the shared gardens I've observed over the years it's fascinating to see how things evolve. Fences have gone back up as conditions change. But one thing that was really cheering to look at—those who'd originally pulled down fences and agreed on new screening and sheds designed to harmonize the neighbourhood all looked so much better than anything else around them. If you decide on a shared garden keep the future in mind even if everything now looks great. Even the most perfect relationship can fall apart.

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