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## Don't fence them in: S.F. neighbors combine backyards

By Julie Chai    August 14, 2015



Photo: Jay Thayer

Two neighbors near Golden Gate Park in S.F. tore down the fence that separated their backyards and worked with landscape architect Jay Thayer to create a shared space.

While many gardeners are trying to conceive new ways of maximizing their tiny landscapes, Tana and Mike Powell and their neighbor Patricia Fripp did something most homeowners would never consider.

They removed the fence between their small backyards.

The neighbors liked the idea of creating a larger, shared space for their homes near Golden Gate Park, so they worked with landscape architect Jay Thayer to create a design that incorporates the elements they all wanted for the 2,500-square-foot plot.

They shared design and upkeep expenses, and it's understood that they, along with their tenants, can use any part of the garden anytime.

Thayer says this example of neighbors collaborating to create something beautiful and shared is a concept that could potentially cover an entire city block.

“When you look down into a typical San Francisco backyard, you see a series of fenced-in pens that look like they're for cattle,” he says. “Instead, we could have these large parks, as big as a block, if people came together to develop something for the greater good.”

### **Design tips**

Landscape architect Jay Thayer's advice on how to combine yards:

**Unify the design:** While the garden covers two properties, the plot is designed as a whole. The same buff-colored Arizona sandstone pavers are used for both patios, and they're connected by a path of irregular Arizona sandstone stepping stones that are dry-set in sand.

Elfin thyme, which can take some foot traffic, grows between the stepping stones, creating a soft look from one end to the other. A dry creek bed of steel gray La Paz pebbles spans both sides, with clusters of larger, multihued river rocks adding contrast.

“Instead of plant material, you have really beautiful gravel,” Thayer says. “It's just another texture and color. And it's not just low maintenance — it's no maintenance.”

**A room of your own:** Each owner wanted a distinct type of space in the larger garden. The Powells entertain a lot and needed a flexible area where they could arrange furniture either as an outdoor living or dining area, so Thayer built a large, open patio that's perfect for cocktails or dinner.

Patricia Fripp preferred an intimate retreat where she could to read, write and relax with a cup of tea. For her, Thayer designed a wisteria-covered arbor that truly feels enclosed for most of the year. “She wanted to feel like she was deep in a garden, so I pushed it all the way to the back of the lot,” landscape architect Jay Thayer says.

**Plant smart:** The garden’s lush palette of primarily low growing shrubs and ground covers, along with a few accent plants, needs just occasional trimming and fertilizing to look good. Evergreen ‘Wheeler’s Dwarf’ pittosporum grows in a tidy mound and adds texture and interest; fountainlike chartreuse ‘Yellow Wave’ flax is a bright focal point; bronze ‘Jack Spratt’ flax adds a rich hue to contrast with the greens; and a large patch of dwarf mondo grass creates softness. Bloomers including ‘Biokovo’ geranium, purple lantana and ‘Stella de Oro’ daylilies are sprinkled in for hits of seasonal color.

**Design for views:** Fripp’s second-floor bedroom and the Powells’ third-floor breakfast area overlook the garden, so in addition to making sure the garden was beautiful at ground level, Thayer wanted it to look good from above. The rectilinear patios provide structure, while gentle curves of the path, dry creek and planting beds create an overall softness.

Thayer also used masses of plants in sweeps that knit together and repeated forms for a graphic appearance. “Don’t choose one each of 30 plants — use fewer plants and more of each, along with a few big accents,” Thayer says.

**Keep your options open:** The property line isn’t covered by any hard-to-remove features such as trees or mortared-in-place hardscape. So, if the current or future owners ever want to rebuild a fence, it will be easy. The only paving that would need to be shifted are stepping stones set in sand; low shrubs and ground covers could be easily dug up.

**The gardens would remain intact:** Fripp’s side would still have a path to her arbor-covered patio, and the Powells would still have their entertaining space. “We really gave it some thought because nothing is forever,” Thayer says.

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