

## Fruits of their labor: SAN JOSE COUPLE WHO RENTED FOR YEARS FINALLY PUT DOWN ROOTS IN THEIR OWN AMAZING BACKYARD GARDEN.

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Aug. 11--When Jon and Janet Gibbens were finally ready to make the leap into home ownership after eight years of renting and pinching pennies, they were looking for more than just a roof over their heads they could call their own.

They were searching for a place to make a garden.

And when they toured a modest bungalow in San Jose's Burbank area last summer, they looked beyond the stretch of bare dirt and weeds out back that would have turned off most first-time buyers.

"We really saw the potential," Janet says. "It was our blank slate."

So they loaded up their enormous collection of potted vegetables and ornamental plants -- it took three trips in a 26-foot U-Haul to move the 450 pots -- and settled in to literally put down roots in their new soil.

One year later, the transformation is astonishing.

In a 15-by-18-foot space that gets full sun all day, the couple is growing a farmers market worth of produce. Fences support colorful cypress vines and three hues of morning glory. One area has been set aside especially for plants that attract hummingbirds and butterflies. Citrus trees and herbs flourish, many still in their containers.

And along the way, what Janet calls "our secret garden" has turned into a peaceful and therapeutic spot. The garden also is a little haven for the couple's five cats -- David, Figero, Othello, Patches and Simpka -- all harness-trained to be tethered outdoors for small stretches at a time. David, a hunky tabby, especially enjoys gnawing on pieces of corn husk ripped right off the tall plants.

"Our friends always used to say 'If you can garden like this in pots, just wait until you get some land,' " says Jon, 38, who by day works for a South San Jose high-tech firm.

They knuckled down right after they moved in, Jon searching the Internet for designs for raised beds and trellising systems and Janet researching varieties of plants they would grow.

"He's a reader, I'm a doer. We make a good team," says Janet, 45, who started gardening in the couple's renter days after being inspired by Patricia Lanza's "Lasagna Gardening" book. Instead of trying to dig cement-like clay soil, the method advocates layering organic materials, lasagne-style, right on top of a garden site and close-planting directly into it.

"Seeing my success with that got Jon hooked," Janet says. "He really wasn't interested in gardening with a pick ax."

After settling on a design cobbled together from several he looked at on the Web, Jon constructed seven raised beds using lengths of 2-by-12 redwood boards bolted neatly together in "L" and rectangular shapes. Narrow bark-mulch paths weave between the boxes.

"I broke up the existing soil as best I could, and then we filled (the boxes) up with the good soil we moved with us and compost we made ourselves," Jon says. The couple have three compost bins and a "worm ranch" to crank out a steady supply of rich, organic soil amendments.

The couple realized early on that the secret to heavy productivity in the postage-stamp garden would be to use its vertical space. So into each raised bed, Jon bolted 10-foot-tall 2-by-2-inch pieces of lumber that were sunk into the ground about a foot for stability.

It took about three months of planning and building to complete the boxes, says Janet, who met her husband when both were students at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo. "But I kept telling Jon that you'll only have to do this once -- they're that sturdy."

Onto the vertical risers, Jon attached cross-braces and then strung strong nylon netting to form a clever "ladder" for tomatoes and other vegetable plants to climb. Another of the beds has a five-foot metal obelisk that keeps healthy vines of green and yellow beans up off the ground.

Even the narrow space behind the garage has been put to use. Jon built circular raised beds with hardware cloth and rebar that now hold vines of pie and Cinderella pumpkins that are stretching over the fence to the neighbor's house.

"They like pumpkins, fortunately," Jon says.

The couple started many of their vegetables and flowers from seed but loaded up on tomato and pepper plants at the annual Spring Garden Market organized by the Master Gardeners of Santa Clara County. They have 20 varieties of mostly heirloom tomatoes -- from super sweet cherries to monster beefsteaks -- and 13 varieties of peppers, mild to hot.

When the tomato plants were small, Jon took off all the suckers and trained the main stems up through the nylon netting, a job that became unmanageable once the plants got to be about four feet tall. Today, they top out at more than 10 feet, and a ladder will be needed to pick much of the fruit.

Jon and Janet credit their watering system -- crafted by tech-guy Jon -- for the garden's robustness. It uses low-volume drip emitters and laser-drilled drip lines.

An eight-station irrigation controller rules the roost -- one station for each raised bed and another for the pumpkin vines out back. The tomatoes are on their own zones and are watered deeply just once a week, for a hour. The peppers get 20 minutes per day and the other beds, 15. The system runs in the early-morning hours.

"This kind of planting is most certainly within the range of most home gardeners," Jon says. "The problem is that most people water their whole garden on the same drip circuit, which leads to overwatering certain plants and underwatering others. Plus, tomato cages are usually too small -- most vines will get bigger than six-plus feet if you let them."

They use a monthly addition of fish emulsion as their only fertilizer.

Aside from a bumper crop of tomatoes and peppers, Jon and Janet -- and lucky friends they call the "grasshoppers" -- are enjoying corn, cucumbers, chard, Walla Walla and red onions, squash, corn, melons, beets, basil, radishes, carrots, several types of lettuces and collard and turnip greens.

And even amid all this bounty, they're both dreaming of next steps for the garden.

Cool-season veggies such as broccoli, snap peas, bok choy and spinach will replace the hot-weather produce. Multiple birdhouses will invite feathered friends to move on in. They already have plans for a small gazebo and pond for the back yard. And out front? They want to rip out the lawn and replace it with drought-tolerant California native plants.

"All those years of being a frustrated renter-gardener are just pouring out of me," says Janet, a former Web designer who maintains the couple's site at [www.jgibbens.com](http://www.jgibbens.com) and stays at home with the garden and the cats. "This is our little paradise."

Check out Holly Hayes' the Dirt blog at [blogs.mercurynews.com/garden](http://blogs.mercurynews.com/garden). Contact her at [hhayes@mercurynews.com](mailto:hhayes@mercurynews.com) or (408) 920-5374.

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