



Written by Marty Ross
Produced by Marty Ross and Stacy Kunstel
Photography by Bob Stefko

Room to Grow

In a garden designed for adults and kids, everyone feels at home.



Friends become family

OPPOSITE: There's something festive about soap bubbles. Taking a little a twirl, Francie Reda fills the backyard with them. **ABOVE:** Terry and Lynn O'Leary and Dana and Rich Reda take it easy on the oval patio, one of several comfortable gathering spots in the garden.

in Lynn and Terry O'Leary's welcoming garden. That's because it's part of the design.

The O'Learys moved into their home in Kansas City in 2007 with two distinctly different ideas for their garden: Lynn wanted green space, where their five children could enjoy their sports. Terry wanted areas for entertaining. So they worked with a garden designer who helped them achieve both goals, turning their backyard into a gathering place where adults and children all feel comfortable. When the O'Learys invite guests over and fire up the grill—or, in the winter months, when they throw another log on the fire in the big outdoor hearth room—friendships flourish.

The inspiration for the garden “was to create areas that are pockets for conversation where people can migrate to” while still preserving some lawn for tossing a ball or playing tag, Terry says.

Kristopher Dabner, a garden designer and owner of The Greensman in Kansas City, helped the couple

interpret their hopes for the garden. He designed a series of adjoining patios that offer several comfortable seating areas and extend gracefully across the property. Before they started the project, the layout was rather formal and square. “Lynn likes structure, but I wanted to soften it up,” Dabner says. One of the new patios is a gracious oval. In the middle of another, Dabner placed a fountain surrounded by a round flowerbed. He framed other flowerbeds with low walls, which serve as supplemental seating.

The plants are low-key but hardworking. The raised planters framing the garden, full of boxwood, yew, holly, hydrangea, and *Liviope*, take advantage of vertical space, and ‘New Dawn’ roses are trained up posts supporting the roof of the outdoor hearth room. There's a sunny spot for Lynn's herbs and just enough room in the beds for bright annual flowers. A distinguished hedge of hornbeams shelters the garden on one side.



The garden layout as vista:
From the living room
windows, the view centers
on the fountain and the
hearth room, where
Francie hangs with the
grown-ups, Lynn and Dana.



Roses, carefully tended by Terry,
clamber along the roofline of
the hearth room where the
guys keep an eye on the grill.
Informality defines O'Leary
backyard gatherings.

The garden is designed on several levels, which helps separate the spaces physically and visually. It's just a step up from the patio around the fountain to the oval patio, where furniture can be arranged for lounging or dining. Little Zoe Reda takes a turn around the fountain.



The outdoor living spaces are carefully centered on views from the house. From her kitchen window, Lynn has a view of a wall fountain and her herb garden. The family room's large windows visually extend the indoor space outdoors, past the three-tiered fountain to the hearth room. French doors connect a sunporch and the outdoor dining area. Evergreens keep the whole space looking attractive all through the winter.

Dabner linked the outdoor spaces together with visual cues, using flagstone for the gathering spots and connecting them all with brick paths. The flagstone patios are like rugs, he says, and the brick pathways emphasize the transitions from one area to the next. The change of levels, with just a couple of steps up to the oval patio and to the hearth room, also helps make each of these areas distinctly separate from the others.

"It's great," Terry says. "We have five conversation areas, and you feel like each area can

ABOVE: The hearth room is like a living room, a kitchen, and an escape from both to the great outdoors. The grill and fireplace are opposite each other and naturally, in summertime, the grill side is the focus of a lot of family activity. **RIGHT:** There's plenty of room to play in the garden, too. LaCrosse sticks are stashed on the steps, ready at hand.





The O'Leary's appropriately named pup, Cozy, never misses any of the parties.



A small bouquet brings the colors of the garden to a tabletop. No-fuss arrangements take just a minute to make.



stand alone, without people feeling like they're lost in this big space."

Sunday garden gatherings have become a firm tradition. All summer long, the O'Leary family and their neighbors, Rich and Dana Reda and their children, gather each weekend to grill and hang out—one week the O'Leary family hosts the party in their backyard, and the next week they all meet at the Redas' garden. Even the college kids look forward to joining in. Other friends and neighbors are always welcome.

The garden "is meant to share," Lynn says. The Redas also have five children, and now, after years of getting together in the garden and in each other's homes, the two families feel almost like one. "Something potentially enormous happens when people join together in the garden," Lynn says. "There is an exchange of unity, a bonding." The food is always great, Terry adds, but it's not so much about the menu as about the laughter, the companionship, and the memories. ●

For more information, see Resources on page 124.

ABOVE: Teenagers chow down at the table on the dining patio, just outside the home's sunporch, while the younger kids stay close to the parents on the oval patio, a few steps away. Each space has its own character. **LEFT:** Grace Reda serves her dessert specialty, French apple tart, alfresco.



A few bright cosmos in a basket of vases. Blooms from the garden are the freshest and most local you'll find.



Refreshing beverages for the adults in an ice bath. The kids prefer a pitcher of pink lemonade.