

Published March 7th, 2018

Growing their backyard garden

By Cathy Dausman



Sharon Metcalf holds a tray of her Sun Gold tomato plants grown in her greenhouse from seeds. While Mt. Diablo in the background is snow covered, the plants survived the recent cold snap just fine. Photo Andy Scheck

soil for the requisite 60- to 90-day incubation period.

The greenhouse is modest - an aluminum frame and polycarbonate window affair. They purchased the 6-foot by 8-foot shed from a big box store 10 years ago and assembled it on site.

"It was a day project," said husband, Mike Metcalf, former Moraga mayor and council member, before explaining that the wooden deck supporting the greenhouse was a separate project.

"When this (shed) falls apart we're going to make a real one out of wood," Sharon Metcalf promised.

There is no thermometer to measure the temperature difference, but direct sun has been warm enough to warrant opening the greenhouse vent and necessitate the installation of mesh screens on the roof to filter the sunlight. Mother nature will provide some shade once the nearby apple tree blossoms.

A greenhouse does more than simply extend the planting season. Even in the relative mildness of a Mediterranean climate a greenhouse provides protection against temperature swings, blustery wind and damaging rain; it also limits exposure to critters and insects. A greenhouse allows plants to be grown year-round.

The Metcalf backyard was not originally sunny. When the couple bought the house in 1985 their lot contained six large pine trees that obscured the view and cut down on sunlight. Their slopes held plenty of juniper too. The pines and juniper were removed earlier and "last summer we pulled the (backyard) pool," Mike Metcalf said, adding "I'm glad it's gone now."

The pool was an above ground model nestled into the yard and surrounded by decking; Sharon Metcalf insisted the deck be left in place when they developed their new 30-foot by 15-foot garden plot. She had Mike build stairs into each end of the oval garden. He grumbled about that project, Sharon says, but Mike Metcalf said the hardest part was installing the plumbing.

The area has two cedar plank raised garden beds on a watering system. As prefab kits ordered online, their installation was a snap. "There's not a nail in the place," Mike Metcalf said, pointing to the slotted metal corner posts. "It's all screwed."

The result is a sunny, bark dust and stepping stone enclave four feet below deck level, which offers full sun exposure and plenty of wind protection. Latticed wood outlines the oval garden. A fabric screen can be quickly mounted on the boxes' metal arches to keep out avian invaders, but Mike Metcalf expects that circling birds of prey will discourage the smaller breeds from lingering in the garden or even on the ground.

Sharon Metcalf plans her winter plantings in late summer. That crop has already yielded broccoli, Brussels sprouts and golden beets. She says homegrown food simply tastes better. When the summer garden is established in May, the Metcalfs look forward to harvesting a salad full of greenery.

The rest of their lot includes plum, apricot and cherry trees, a blood orange, lime and lemon tree,

Sharon Metcalf's "little babies" are consigned to her backyard, and although recent nights have been frosty, her "babies" are staying nice and warm. Their nursery is a greenhouse shed on a raised platform on a Moraga hillside.

When Lamorinda Weekly visited, the vista of rolling green hills included a dusting of snow visible on Mt. Diablo's slopes, but full sun and a southeastern exposure ensured the temperature inside the greenhouse was noticeably warmer than ambient midday air temperature.

The view looking out was crystal clear. "I only wipe the panels maybe once a year on the inside," Metcalf said.

Metcalf is a self-taught gardener, who started as a child, following in her father's footsteps. "My Dad would love this," she said, gazing fondly at tomato starts of San Marzano, Roma, sun gold and Black Krim plus peppers, herbs and flowers including marigolds and her favorite - hollyhock - all poking their seedling heads out of potting

pomegranate, persimmon, grapes, a rose bed and a Granny Smith apple tree.

Mike Metcalf knows his wife just loves working in the garden.

"My first love is roses," Sharon Metcalf says, eyeing her blossoming buds, "then the garden." She's definitely got the green thumb, and the yard for it.



Space for the garden after the pool was removed. Photo provided



While the winter garden is coming to an end, Sharon can still enjoy picking fresh broccoli. Photo Andy Scheck

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