This gardener’s plot may be small, but her vision is as big as the prairie.

Farmhouse Style

Story and photos by Rhonda Fleming Hayes

The term “urban farming” is tossed about a lot lately. For some, an urban farm is as simple as a homeowner growing a few veggies on a city lot, possibly with chickens pecking around. Barb Gasterland, with help from husband, Hans, has done that and much more with a nod to farmhouse vernacular, using visual and practical elements that add up to a picturesque, sustainable rural scene within minutes of downtown Minneapolis.

Like many Minnesota farms, you approach Barb’s place through swaying prairie grasses and come upon an archetypal farmhouse settled onto its land. Entering, you pass a low spot in the earth, then cross the yard and ascend the porch while turning to survey the crops and livestock. Yet this property measures just shy of a quarter-acre.
A bison sculpture looks especially at home in Barb’s prairie in fall.

Garden Experiments
While she’s fine with the urban-farm label, Barb prefers to think of her landscape as “more my experimental station.” In many ways, it’s the culmination (so far) of a lifetime of horticultural learning. An early interest in floral design and flowers eventually led to this multi-ecosystem yard filled with native plants, vegetables, herbs and, indeed, flowers.

While experimental in nature, the garden is the result of deliberate design, as was the house. Barb has a type of genetic dysplasia. Related health issues and her short stature dictated that her house and garden be built with accessibility in mind since there were times when she used a wheelchair because of severe joint pain. (Her enthusiasm for learning and gardening were not restricted, however. During a tree-care class at the University of Minnesota, Barb simply went “off-road” on her mobility scooter.)

In the beginning, Barb’s yard was a blank slate, albeit one of hard-packed clay soil. She enlisted noted landscape designer Colston Burrell to help bring to life a garden that embraced many of the environmentally friendly concepts Barb gleaned from her own study and her experiences as a U of M Extension Master Gardener.
Burrell happened to be teaching at the University of Minnesota when Barb was envisioning her new garden. His interest in ecological innovation within urban and suburban neighborhoods fit well with Barb's aspirations. The influence of his belief that good design comes from a strong sense of place is evident on Barb's property.

**Prairie and Bog**
Barb laughs about the notion of planning a prairie before it's planted. Sure, you can determine the initial plants, but "prairies by nature are random," she says. Hers includes a wide assortment of native plants: tall grasses, coarse-textured perennials, unassuming ground-hugging foliage and colorful blooms all coexisting under the watchful gaze of an iron bison sculpture. Barb used plug plugs rather than seed to get the prairie started.

The prairie changes every day as the season progresses, offering new stems, flowers and seed pods for visual interest. It provides habitat for birds, bees, butterflies, frogs, lizards and the occasional snake. Yet it is at its most glorious come fall. The feathery grasses catch the waning light, and warm colors emerge from the green background as temperatures cool. The rusty sculpture looks right at home peering through the tall, tan grass plumes.

While the prairie sprang from a desire to avoid a conventional lawn, it still needs maintenance. It is cut annually in early spring. Lately, Barb has hired Prairie Restorations to do this job with its machinery that can easily chop up the material into mulch that is then left in place. She also hired the company to do a controlled burn, which simulates the naturally occurring brush fires that act to renew an ecosystem. Although not as exciting, Barb herself weeds out invasive plants like thistles when they appear.

The backyard bog is a catchment for rainwater that collects runoff from the house and slope of the yard. Barb was inspired to include the bog after learning more about the importance of watershed and rainwater management. Because it is closer to the house than is common for most rain gardens, it was constructed with a synthetic liner to protect the basement from dampness or flooding. Packed tight with moisture-loving plants, the bog serves to capture and filter rainwater while producing a season-long display of appealing foliage and beautiful blooms.

Along the driveway, another low area

---

*In two different catchment gardens, Barb uses these attractive, hard-working plants, which are well adapted to wet or difficult sites.*

**Variegated sweet flag iris** (*Acorus calamus* ‘Variegata’ and *A. gramineus* ‘Ogon Golden’)

**Lady's mantle** (*Alchemilla mollis*)

**Swamp milkweed** (*Asclepias incarnata*)

**Aristolbe, including** *Aristolbe* ‘Loie’, *A. canadensis* ‘Visions in Red’, *A. crispa* ‘Perkeo’, *A. chinensis* ‘Purple Candle’

**Flat top aster** (*Aster umbellatus*)

**Marsh marigold** (*Caltha palustris*)

**Fringed sedge** (*Carex crinita*)

**White and pink turtlehead** (*Chelone glabra* and *C. lyonii*)

**Variegated dogwood** (*Cornus* ‘Ivory Halo’)

**Indian rhubarb** (*Darmera peltata*)

**Boneset** (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*)

**Queen of the prairie** (*Filipendula purpurea*)

**Bottle gentian** (*Gentiana andrewsii*)

**Sneezeweed** (*Helenium autumnale*)

**Iris,** including *Iris versicolor* ‘Blue Flag’ and *I. siberica*

**Cardinal flower** (*Lobelia cardinalis*)

**Golden marjoram** (*Origanum vulgare* ‘Dr. Ictswaart’)

**Smartweed** (*Polygonum amplexicaule* ‘Firetail’)

**Canadian burnet** (*Sanguisorba canadensis*)

**Pasque flower** (*Pulsatilla patens* ‘Papageno’)

**Tall meadow rue** (*Thalictrum polygamum*)

**Ironweed** (*Vernonia fasciculate*)

---

Variegated sweet flag thrives in a bog garden.
serves as a swale to divert rainwater and provide yet another setting for new and different cultivars that can be viewed from the front porch.

**Vegetable Troughs**
In a bold gesture of farm chic, a row of galvanized metal livestock tanks stands as stylish and efficient raised vegetable beds. Although Barb had life-changing hip-replacement surgery in 2007, which gave her greater mobility and freedom from pain, she still appreciates the just-right height of these tanks. They allow her to tend a wide variety of vegetables and herbs without the need to bend or stoop.

She re-purposed antique metal bedsteads for trellises, placing them in the center of each tank to maximize her growing options for climbers like pole beans and peas. Pairings of vegetables and herbs—such as lacy fennel and squash, delicate cilantro and stout purple cabbage, beets and parsley—make this food-growing operation pretty and practical.

Grilled vegetables are on the menu all season long at the Gasterland house. But when asked, Barb will tell you she finds peas and cucumbers the most tasty and rewarding vegetables to grow. And she always includes zucchini on her planting roster because Hans thinks it is an attractive plant. In another area, she grows taller tomatoes, eggplants and peppers in the ground, despite some insect and disease challenges.

**A Welcoming Garden**
A more traditional herbaceous border with perennials, peonies, native shrubs and small trees runs along the back of the yard. The nearby patio is spotted with other colorful containers of foliage and flowers. Smaller galvanized troughs hold herb gardens and water gardens.

It’s a welcoming place for people as well as the chattering birds that flutter in and out at the hanging feeders. Citing a “willingness to share,” Barb frequently hosts visitors and tours through her garden in the spirit of education and hospitality. Not one to worry or point out weeds, she shows a relaxed attitude many gardeners should emulate.

In spite of its urban setting, the yard’s proximity to wooded parkland makes it attractive to destructive deer, raccoons, rabbits and woodchucks, which she battles with hardware cloth, repellants and the occasional swear word.

**Barb’s Backyard Flock**
Rounding out this urban farm scene is a charming red chicken coop and its resident flock. A patch of crayon-colored zinnias greets you at the entrance. Mature larch trees shade the coop and offer a perching spot for the chickens. In fall, these trees turn bright yellow, setting off the cute red coop even more.

Sad to say, this is Barb’s second flock after her first hand of birds was stolen. The rustlers even nabbed “Colonel Sanders,” the head rooster. Barb likes to think he might have given them good reason to rethink their crime.

The chickens love to eat kale and other garden trimmings while providing fresh eggs, compost and endless entertainment. Barb lets their strong manure compost for three years, following U of M guidelines, so as not to burn her plants. While she usually only uses this fertilizer for her edibles, she has plans to see if the powerful stuff can be harnessed to suppress weeds in some problem areas of the yard.

For the most part, Barb has learned to love or at least tolerate some weeds. In summer, the chickens forage while protected from predators within a lengthy network of low shade tunnels originally meant to shelter plants. They seem perfectly happy to graze upon a lawn that has turned to mostly creeping Charlie. And Barb’s OK with it, too.