



## HIT THE DECK

WITH A FEW CHANGES, THE DARK, DAMP AREA BENEATH A DECK CAN BE TRANSFORMED INTO AN INVITING OASIS

BY LORI PELKOWSKI

**H**ere's the situation: A beautiful backyard. A walkout basement. Sliding doors leading out to a patio where summer meals are enjoyed. A large deck jutting out overhead of the first floor family room. That ugly area beneath the deck, where nothing will grow except maybe a few tenacious weeds, marring the beauty of the backyard and lovely patio.

It can be fenced in to create a dark damp storage area, or covered with lots of lattice to create a dark damp storage area, where mold and mildew will grow freely on anything stored there. Or, patio chairs can be arranged so backs are turned away from the patch of dirt furrowed by rain falling through the slats of the flying deck.

Instead of hiding or ignoring that lifeless part of the yard—and it can be a large part of the yard—transform it into a garden with echoes of native woodlands that will unify the entire outdoor living space. With some effort, probably not much more than it would take to fence in and hide the offending area, a garden can be created to connect the patio, the deck and the rest of the backyard.

Edgar David of S. Edgar David Landscape Architects in Worcester, Pennsylvania has just the formula for transforming that aesthetically unpleasing space into a unique and lovely garden area.

Site preparation.

Various sizes of rocks, from gravel to boulders.

Careful consideration when choosing plants.

Watering religiously during the establishment period.

“Dry, dark, unutilized and unpleasing characterize these underdeck situations. Water runs off or just sits there because of a compacted clay condition,” says Edgar. “This hardpan, a remnant of construction, limits the adaptability of plants. Care and effort in proper site preparation is essential.” The compacted soil must be broken up and lots of organic matter, such as good compost, added. Edgar cannot overemphasize the importance of soil preparation as the first and ultimately most important ingredient to the success of an underdeck garden.

“There is no question that the lowest and deepest areas of the underdeck space are the darkest and driest,” says Edgar. If the deck is a full story overhead, there will be more light and moisture, in addition to the added benefit of being able to walk under it. Edgar combines gravel, cobble, boulders and stepping-stones to give it a nicely integrated balance of stone and plants. “Clustering plants between stones allows plants to draw from the more limited resources in an underdeck habitat,” he explains.

*continued on page 86*



space, what their goals are," said Steve. "We physically walk around the garage so that we both have a better idea of what the basic space looks like."

With some garages Steve has visited, just being able to walk through the clutter has been a feat, with wall to wall boxes, bikes, large items that do not fit into the basement and various storage bins. "I try to reassure the homeowner that this situation is not unique, and I welcome the challenge of making that space into a beautiful, useful habitat," said Steve. But more commonly, he sees garages with just enough clutter that the cars cannot be parked there, and the homeowner wants to make better use of the space.

The next step of the process is where Steve introduces the homeowner to a tour of different kinds of wall, floor and cabinet systems; with samples of each so that they can more easily visualize what he is talking about. "I always recommend that a potential customer come to the process with an open mind because once we begin working together as a team, the ideas and concepts start to flow," he says.

The final step is the signing of a formal contract, with installation within a few weeks of that signing. The cost of the process could be as little as two thousand dollars to a high of fifteen, but most of what Everything Garage does is in the five to nine thousand dollar range. The completed garages are now extended workshop areas, recreational rooms and efficient storage facilities to be used by the entire family. "The most elaborate garage I have designed had a Corian work surface, a Kohler sink and Portuguese tiles," said Steve. "With most other garages, I have installed wall, cabinetry and/or floor systems."

Based upon his experience, Steve does not recommend painting garage floors. He notes that given our geographical location, there is much moisture that is trapped in concrete. Correctly painting a garage floor is a time consuming process, one that is very inconvenient to the homeowner. According to Steve, the floor has to be power washed in two stages, etched with muriatic acid which then has to be cleaned, the floor must be primed and painted three times, with a final top coat.

"In between each process we have to allow for drying time which in the summer time, with our humidity, could take

several weeks where the garage would be off limits," explained Steve. "Even after all that has been accomplished, the homeowner needs to know that the paint has effectively sealed the floor, trapping the moisture inside. Eventually with the pressure of hot tires moving over that cold floor, little pieces of floor start to flake and find their way into the house. That is when they call Everything Garage."

The success with which Steve switched career gears and created a new business for himself attracted the attention of the local paper, who published an article about individuals such as himself who achieved a major career change. Unbeknownst to Steve, another enterprising individual was reading the article and thinking to himself, "This is a pretty cool concept!"

Bill De Fazio had owned and operated his own business, and was ripe for a change in employment when he read the article about Everything Garage. "The article took me back to my roots," says Bill. "I spent a lot of time in my garage, watching my father change the oil or tinkering with the car. Typically, we used to have the garage door raised, listening to music while the two of us worked together. I just had to e-mail Steve."

Over a cup of coffee, the two men decided that Bill would be a welcomed member of Steve and Everything Garage's team. Since that time they have redesigned countless garages throughout the Greater Delaware Valley area, and reinvented that large living space into a model room of efficiency and refinement.

As for their own garages, Bill says his 1929 detached garage, only large enough to originally accommodate a Model T car, is a workshop area for his many projects, and "it is definitely clean."

Steve's double car garage is home to two cars, two bikes and one trash can. "I practice what I preach," Steve says. "I am extremely well organized and I don't keep clutter. I really do believe in what I am doing."

For more information, visit ([www.everythinggarage.com](http://www.everythinggarage.com)). ♦

---

*Margo A. Ragan is a contributing writer with Montgomery County Town & Country Living magazine and an area freelance writer.*

## Garden

*continued from page 83*

Edgar describes the area under a deck as much like a forest floor beneath tall trees. "The landscape under a deck is limited as to natural resources—sun and moisture—much like the landscape under a forest canopy," he says. "The plants selected for this dry shade situation will be plants that grow in the under-story of a woodland canopy. The community of plants introduced into this landscape must be appropriate for these conditions."

Although the plantings won't be as thick, lush and dense as in a sunnier, moister situation, the result is woody and very appealing. "Think of the space as a habitat," suggest Edgar. The plants that are chosen for this situation will be plants that grow naturally

*Mountain laurel  
(Kalmia latifolia).  
According to Dirr,  
it's "without  
question one of the  
handsomest  
flowering broadleaf  
evergreens."*

in similar conditions. By grouping plantings towards the edge of the garden, they will be able to take better advantage of any additional sun and moisture.

Edgar always likes to recommend native plants for all landscapes. Here are a few of his favorites for the under-deck garden:

Mapleleaf Viburnum (*Viburnum acerifolium*) in woodland settings with limited sun and moisture, this shrub often grows as a woody groundcover. Use lots of little seedlings to create a groundcover effect. Michael Dirr, author of *Dirr's Hardy Trees and Shrubs*,

loves this shrub. "This denizen of the woods offers tremendous shade tolerance and exquisite fall color. The leaves resemble Red Maple leaves. The foliage turns fluorescent rose to grape-juice purple in fall. White flower clusters open in June and are followed by shiny black fruit that ripen in September and persist into winter. Adaptable to difficult dry and shady conditions." Sounds perfect, doesn't it?

Lowbush Blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium*). Dirr says, "The delicate pink flowers and sweet, bluish blackberries of the Lowbush Blueberry are justification for [garden] use. It is a spreading shrub with lustrous dark green to blue-green foliage that turns brilliant scarlet and crimson in fall. Makes a fine ground-cover mass and needs minimal maintenance." Minimal maintenance is good.

Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*). According to Dirr, it's "without question one of the handsomest flowering broadleaf evergreens." The flowers are massed in 4-inch diameter inflorescences, and each individual flower 'offers intricate beauty.' An added bonus for us: The Mountain laurel is the state flower of Pennsylvania, and

will prosper in a sunnier corner of the underdeck garden.

Edgar also recommends the evergreen Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*), calling it "a spectacular plant." So is the Wood Fern (*Dryopteris*), another native plant that is at home in a woodland canopy.

Other perennial plants to try in the underdeck garden (especially on the outer edges) include Astilbes, with their large plumes of white, pink or red flowers; Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum*), a plant grown mostly for its bright green foliage edged in creamy white; Lungwort (*Pulmonaria*), with dark green foliage splattered with white, looking for all the world like a pair of painters boots; and the ever-popular Hosta, whose leaf and flower colors are numerous.

Keep in mind when choosing perennials for shade that most of them prefer moist shade, but will tolerate drier conditions once they are established. According to Edgar, "A lot of plants are sensitive to establish, requiring soil improvement and manual irrigation during the establishment period." What this means is that the plants

must be watered faithfully during their first year and even into their second year. Once a commitment is made to a plant, a commitment must be made to water it. This cannot be emphasized enough. A garden, particularly one in as inhospitable a habitat as an underdeck garden, will fail without consistent watering.

Edgar recommends "manual irrigation"—watering by hand, over irrigation systems, but a soaker hose laid beneath a layer of mulch can be a helpful addition to hand watering. One of the nicest ways to enjoy a garden is to relax while watering it.

Transforming the space under a deck into a lovely garden can be a satisfying way to unite the different elements of a yard. Follow these steps to success and turn those patio chairs around. ❖

---

*Lori Pelkowski owns and operates The Midnight Gardener, dedicated to garden maintenance and garden writing in historic Bucks County, PA. Got gardening questions? Send an E-mail to: (midnightgardener@hotmail.com).*