

Side Yards

How often do we think about our sideyards? Those open spaces between the lot line and our homes, garages or other outbuildings are often very narrow. And the narrower the space, the less likely we are to think about them or use them.

They are of course essential, a way to get from front to back without trespassing on neighbors' lots. If they're narrow, they're often relegated to some form of walkway with turfgrass or hardscaping.

For as small as they are and as little as we "use" them, what we require of them is significant:

- They need to be somewhat navigable to move from front to back within the property lines.
- Since they butt up to buildings, they need to slope away from foundations to prevent water damage.
- We don't want them to be an eyesore, either to our neighbors or to ourselves.
- If they're close to homes or other buildings next door, privacy or some kind of visual barrier is often desirable.

Homeowners, and gardeners in particular, like to use every inch of land they have. The wider a sideyard is, the more likely to be used like any other yard space. But there's no reason to waste even a narrow patch of yard. It might be just 3 feet wide, but if it's 50 feet long, that's 150 square feet.

So what can we do with these "outdoor hallways"? Below are some ideas but do check city codes; and it's helpful to let neighbors know what you're doing in advance if it will affect their property or views.

What do you need? What do you want?

For homeowners with dogs, a dog run might be the highest priority. Stepping stones or turf are the most likely choices for surfaces as very few groundcovers can handle the abuse.

For families with children, some kind of usable play space could take pressure off the more visible front and backyard. Is there room for an outdoor kitchen, hopscotch or sandbox? Is it cool or warm enough for use in the times and seasons they're most likely to use it?

If storage space is at a premium, is there room for narrow storage for things that don't require temperature control? Tools, ladders, lawn or sports equipment, etc. Again, storage that is not an eyesore.

Is it wide enough for a small patio area with tables and chairs? Keep in mind that sunlight or shade can be intense in narrow spaces like this and can vary dramatically by season.

Plants

What do you want in your sideyard? "I know," says the gardener, "plants." Not bare soil or physical stuff but plants – for beauty, interest, eating, pollinators. Possibly a space for a potting bench, maybe even a foldup one that can be raised and lowered as needed. But more likely plants.

The amount of sunlight and moisture will dictate plant choices, but groundcovers can cover bare soil and eliminate the need for mowing. Sedges can only handle minimal foot traffic but they tend to be lower and require almost no care. Taller plants are preferably upright to keep paths walkable. One tricky thing about these tight spaces is that they may have a full day of shade and then an hour or more of full, hot late day sun, or vice versa. It may take some experimenting to find the shade or sun plants best adapted to the conditions.

Edible options depend on sunlight and moisture but salad greens like kale, lettuce or arugula and root crops like radishes and carrots can handle limited sun, which is actually a benefit for greens and extends the season.

Vines on a trellis, chain link or other style fence can convert undesired views to green ones.

Keep your neighbor in mind. Aggressive plants will impact their yard possibly more than your own. With these spaces that are may be more visible to them than to us, a slight twist of Wendell Berry's "Do unto those downstream [beside you] as you would have them do unto you" is a good guideline for making neighborly choices.

