

CHARLOTTE'S CHESHIRE GARDEN

Freddi Steele

Gardeners are at once artists and scientists. Their palette is the palest pastels that glow in the moonlight, and the vibrant primary colors with thousands of combinations that give us Sedona's red rocks and the warm emerald of Ponderosa Pines. Their laboratory is land, from the tiniest circle of dirt under a single Wall O' Water sheltering a tomato plant, to the two and half acre ranchettes east of town - or a neglected lot - and everything in between. They may deliberately try different plants and seeds or nurture what has been "released" by birds, blasted in by the wind, or deposited by receding floodwaters. Their texts are gardening blogs, an avalanche of specialty catalogs, priceless experience, and each other.

Yet these lovers of growing things don't operate in a vacuum. They are amongst us, these citizen gardeners who are undaunted by the desolation of bare ground. They don their woollies like the rest of us as the days shorten and winter approaches. Unlike many, they keep their lamentations about the difficulties of gardening at 7,000 feet to a whisper. If anything, they relish the rigors of gardening in Flagstaff's dry continental, four-season climate, finding the prospect invigorating and downright fun.

One such inspiring example is Charlotte Dodgson, a native Californian and longtime gardener who moved to the northwest Flagstaff neighborhood of Cheshire eight and half years ago from Colorado. No stranger to planting at elevation, she was recently asked how she accomplished her yard's "extreme makeover", with its beautiful flowers and thriving shrubs. Its condition when she bought it in 2005, she advises, was "...dog ready", meaning that there was nothing but weeds, mud and rocks everywhere, and the front yard was a mix of

lawn and gravel.”

Some may find sparsely vegetated ground just too overwhelming to deal with. Not Charlotte. She came up with a plan and did some winging it, too. She says that, “I usually wait a season ... to see how the sun moves over the property, where the shade areas are, how the rain flows on the grounds, and to see if there are other issues. This gives me time to think about what needs to change on the property overall, what I can plant (bushes, flowers, vegetables), and where and what hardscape I need to put in to accommodate the sun and shade patterns, and the flow of rainwater that hits my property; also water that comes from elsewhere, such as neighbors’ property and the street, if any.”

When asked what the main challenges were, she responds, “I had a major issue with water accumulating into a small lake in front of my front door whenever it rained. A hard lengthy rain would flood the street, and the water running downhill would jump the curb and flow into my front yard, which is lower than the street by 30 inches on the one side to 14 inches on the other, all sloping toward my front door... Also, a neighbor had a French drain put onto their downspout to direct the water away from their home...all that water off their roof was then directed to my side yard and up against my house. I needed to build a small rock border around the area to direct the water to my back yard so it would fan out over my back lawn and flower beds, and not continue into either of my other neighbors’ yards.”

Charlotte’s advice to gardeners new to Flagstaff? “Take time to learn the sun, shade, wind, and water patterns on your property before thinking of the design layout of your garden,” she advises, “Then, before purchasing any trees, shrubs or other container plants, learn what grows in your property zone [microclimate, Sunset or USDA agricultural zone], which can change from one neighborhood in Flagstaff to another...don’t trust what you find in several of our garden centers to

be zone friendly to Flagstaff. I see things that I would grow in Northern California but would never put in my garden here because it is not a plant for this zone.”

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