



featured

Gardening in Laramie Valley is like

By Tony Hoch

For Howard and Pat Parker, living on their 35-acre piece of heaven in the Laramie Valley for five years has been a journey of adaptation.

Moving here from Indiana, they come from a very different environment and have adjusted to a rural lifestyle with much harsher conditions and limited resources. They were open-minded about not trying to bring Indiana plants and practices here and have done their best to live in harmony with the high plains of southeastern Wyoming, about 5 miles south of Laramie.

They knew what they were getting into, since they had been visiting their daughter in Laramie for 10 years prior to moving here after retirement to be closer to family. "It's like gardening on another planet," says Pat as she reflects on



A wood fence provides a microclimate for perennial flowers and other landscaping plants.

the differences between here and Indiana.

The Parkers were well-equipped to make the transition; they are seasoned land managers, having owned a 17-acre, mostly wooded parcel in southern Indiana for 26 years. Of those 17 acres, three acres were horse pasture, and their two horses could not keep the grass grazed down.

With annual production at around 750 pounds of forage/acre on the Parkers' Wyoming property, uncontrolled grazing by two

horses could easily devastate the rangeland, and they understand this well. Howard has split the lot into two equal pastures, and horses are let out to graze in the daytime only during the growing season. In the evenings, the two horses are fed hay in their corral. They consume about 7 tons of purchased hay per year, which is approximately the same amount of grass that can be sustainably grazed on the property.

The Parkers' pastures are remarkably weed-free, though Howard does some mowing to keep down the Canada thistle and foxtail barley before they go to seed. He also pulls a harrow across the pasture to break up and help reincorporate manure into the soil. The manure serves two purposes: one is to replenish critical nutrients for the rangeland grasses

and the other is to hold even more precious soil moisture in this windy, arid country.

Manure from the corral is piled up and composted for gardening. The two horses produce enough manure to keep the pastures healthy and satisfy the needs of friends and local garden club members for personal and community projects. In an area where organic material is like gold, the Parkers also compost all of their vegetable and garden



Howard Parker loads weed-free, composted manure for a neighbor's garden.



Howard and Pat Parker enjoying their colorful oasis in July.

landowners

gardening on a different planet

byproducts in five straw-bale bins. Straw bales are arranged in a U-shape to hold compost.

In recounting how he selected and started trees on the property, Howard confides, “The wind tears us to pieces” when explaining the need to establish trees for shelter. He explains the only native deciduous option, cottonwood, requires too much water, so they settled on hardy, low-water evergreens like piñon pine, ponderosa pine, mugo pine, and various junipers. Even on drip irrigation, these took three years to establish, and some required wind screens for protection.

To compensate for the harsh wind conditions, the Parkers choose to keep their decorative landscaping close to the house and surrounded by an attractive wood fence lined with chicken wire, which helps keep the bunnies and pronghorn out. This creates a nurturing microclimate for the plants inside the perimeter and protects the water-saving and weed-suppressing wood

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chip mulch from the ferocious winds.

Perennial flowers are relatively low maintenance, and potted annuals add a bright splash of seasonal color near the entryways. A timed, drip irrigation system under the mulch adds to the ease of maintenance and conserves water. Part of the landscaped area includes edible fruits and other plants on the more protected eastern exposure. These include raspberries, asparagus, strawberries, cole, salad greens, chives, dill, and other herbs.

The well-constructed house also reflects the conservation-minded Parkers’ knack for adapting to the environment. It is built with insulated



Fences help slow desiccating winds and protect raspberries and other garden plants.

concrete forms, or ICF, which is concrete poured between thick plastic foam layers, giving the walls an R-28 insulation rating; plain concrete is R-0. The walls, coupled with R-50 attic insulation and special window configurations (south facing windows with appropriate awnings that allow low winter sun to enter the home and be captured for passive solar heat, yet keep out high-angle summer sun) result in lowered utility bills year-round.

“The liquid propane boiler that heats water circulated through the floors for radiant heat is used

sparingly,” says Howard, “as we prefer to use sustainably produced fuel in our wood pellet stove instead.” Radiant heat in the garage floors also keeps it “just warm enough to keep the dog dishes thawed.”

Through thoughtful study and planning, long before ground was broken, the Parkers have built themselves a splendid, comfortable home on the sometimes harsh range. The management they are applying to their land every day assures a pleasant and sustainable environment, harshness notwithstanding!

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