



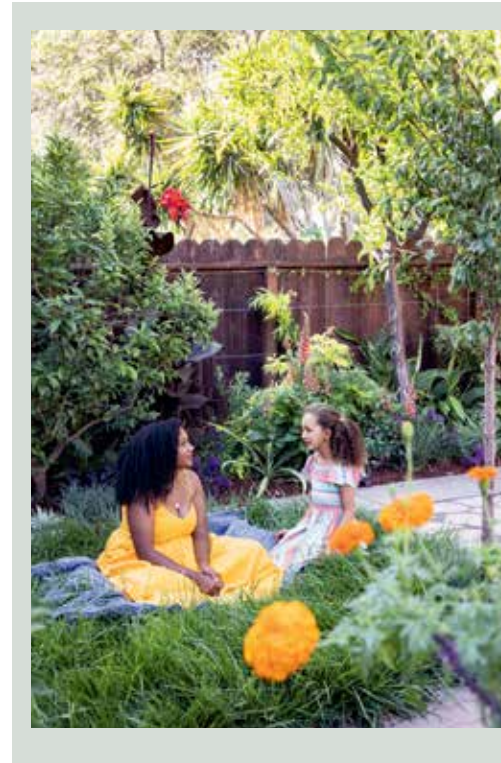
# For One and All

How one family's garden became a wonderland for social gatherings, a deeper connection to cultural identity, and a place of beauty and calm.

BY LESLIE BENNETT AND JULIE CHAI  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY RACHEL WEILL

Malaika Dower, right, delights in her backyard garden, which is the site of weekly neighborhood cocktail hours and spontaneous gatherings. She says, "The garden transformed our family's relationship to our home and being at home." Here she, her mother Jacqueline, daughter Lucy, and husband Eben enjoy crafting beverages incorporating homegrown fruits and herbs. (Designed by Pine House Edible Gardens: Lonna Lopez, Jessica Comerford, and Leslie Bennett.)

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### INCLUDE A MICRO LAWN

Turf lawns often get a bad rap, largely because they require a lot of water and care to look good. Although waterwise lawn options exist, they're not quite as easy to use or enjoy as traditional types.

Rather than adding a large lawn, or feeling that you have to do away with one entirely, you can include a micro lawn. The one pictured, left, in the Dower garden is about 7 by 9 feet, which gives just enough space to relax on. Including a micro lawn as a small but intentional design feature adds a sense of cool lushness, creates negative green space, and can break up an expanse of hardscape.

Opposite page, top: Malaika Dower harvests 'Sun Gold' tomatoes in her garden. Opposite, bottom: Malaika includes edibles that are familiar to her mother, such as roselle (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*), which reminds her of their life in Guyana. Left: Though the overall space is compact, the backyard lives large, with zones for growing food, dining, lounging, and play. Two large, galvanized steel watering troughs provide just enough space for growing herbs, vegetables, and annual flowers.



During urban walks around their Bay Area neighborhood, Malaika Dower and her daughter, Lucy, came upon some fruitful discoveries: blackberries bordering a parking lot, cherries in a community park, herbs and figs in a traffic circle, and grapes growing over a fence, with a sign from its owner inviting passersby to help themselves. Foraging fruit where it was permissible became part of their regular adventures. "I was never an outdoorsy person—I'm an urbanite," Malaika says. Discovering that she could harvest edibles directly from the source was so delightful that she wanted to do it at home, where she, her daughter, her husband, Eben, and her mom, Jacqueline, could have fresh fruit at their fingertips.

Initially, Malaika simply wanted to grow raspberries along a side fence, but she eventually decided to engage Pine House Edible Gardens ([www.PineHouseEdibleGardens.com](http://www.PineHouseEdibleGardens.com)) to renovate the entire backyard. Along with using bright colors reminiscent of Guyana, where her family is from, she says, "I had a vision of what I wanted: elegant garden parties, gracious outdoor living, and playing soca [music] or tinkly jazz to get the vibe going."

The once nearly barren plot now overflows with sweet fruit, vibrant flowers (including a Cinco de Mayo™ rose in honor of Lucy's May 5 birthday), and foliage, and it expands their home's living space, with spots to read, work, dine, nap, relax, and entertain. Malaika explains that the relationship she's cultivating with her garden is in part for her daughter. "You think about the things you want your kids to have core memories of, and I want my daughter to have a core memory

of me doing things I enjoy," she says. "I'm already predisposed for this hard work ethic that's about productivity, productivity, productivity, and I'm trying to free her from that and understand you can be productive doing things that you like."

"It doesn't have to be on the grandest of scales, but who's to say I can't have this luxurious, relaxing-feeling lifestyle? I would love my daughter to grow up with a core memory of casual ease and elegance. Yes, we have jobs and we have hard things going on, but there are tiny moments we can enjoy."

In large part, the backyard is Malaika's solitary recharging space. "I didn't expect it to have such an impact on me," she says. "It's truly my sanctuary: my place to have my time and do what I love to do. The garden gives me peace—it's so easeful and calm, and elegant but not at all. There's something about being able to have this outdoor moment that has refreshed this idea I have of enjoying life."

And having inherited her mother's entertaining prowess, and to honor her late father's love of a good party, Malaika regularly welcomes guests. "This garden has given me so much inspiration to live this life. I lure people back here with it," she says. "It's been the impetus for a lot of celebration and non-celebration. Everybody who comes is, like, 'What's the occasion?' And I'm, like, *life*. The occasion is life." ■

Founder and owner of Pine House Edible Gardens, Leslie Bennett is an Oakland, California-based landscape designer and writer. Formerly senior garden editor at *Sunset* magazine, Julie Chai is a writer and editor based in Los Altos, California.



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