

The Secret Garden

Annette Argabright



1) Survey/Observation

Remember the first part of observation is to ask “what does the land say to me?”



Our grandsons, Oliver (9) and Gavin (4), are drawn to this area because of this swing and they feel safe. The area has been referred to as the “Secret Garden”. Perhaps it was a secret because it needed Oliver and Gavin’s input for the design.

According to Oliver (9), the plants and trees of this area love to watch him and Gavin play and wish they could play on the swing too.

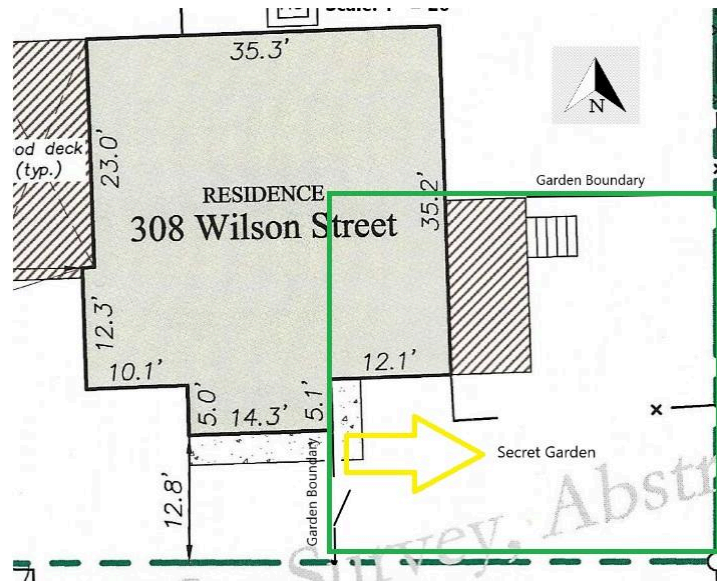
OBSERVING THE LANDSCAPE

Where are you? Southeast corner of our property just off our sunroom.

Which country? America

Town/city? Lake Dallas, Texas





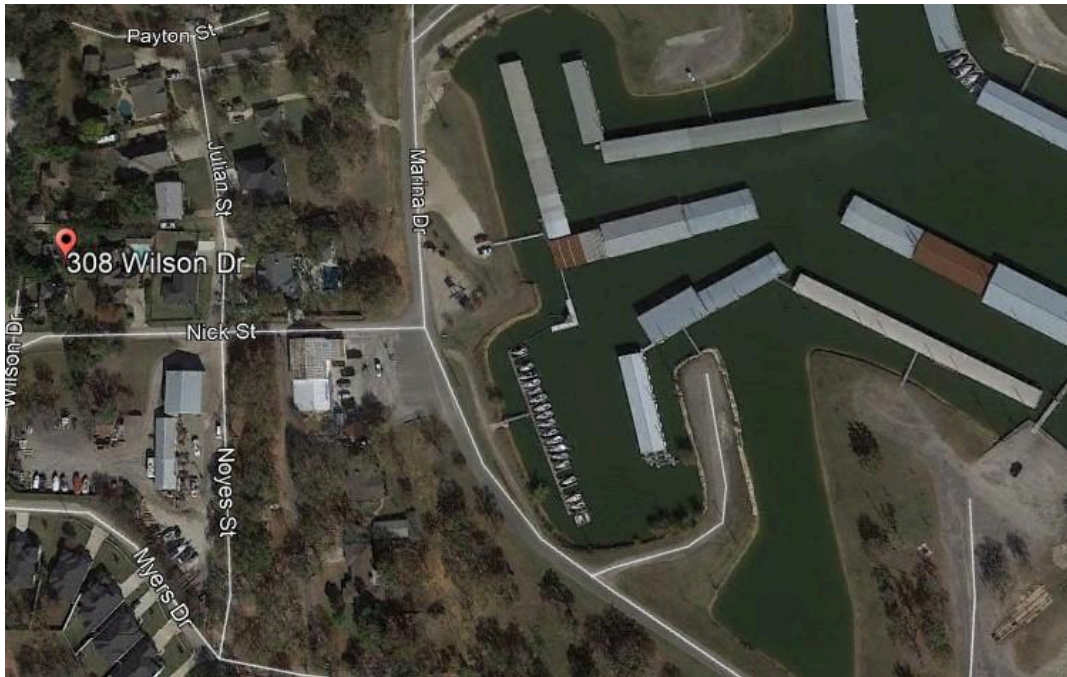
Landscape

What is the landscape like? Is it a valley? A mountain? [A hill](#)

How far is it to the sea? A quarter mile from a lake. And about 293 miles (472 kilometers) to the ocean (Gulf of Mexico).



Is the ground flat or sloping? If it's sloping, which direction does the slope face? It slopes down to the northeast.



Senses

What do you hear, see, smell, and feel in different parts of the site? I hear traffic, people, birds, aquatic birds, insects, and large machinery from the boat repair shop.

What do you feel like doing here? Playing, relaxing, dreaming, exploring

What does your intuition tell you about the place? This area has always been the secret garden that was waiting to be revealed. The boys helped unlock its potential.

If you were to write a poem, rap, dance or sing, what would it be? It would be sung by the wind through windchimes with low tones. They would help to drown out noise and help us to embrace the enchantment here.

As you walk around the boundaries, what do you notice about neighbouring land? There are neighbors behind and next door. The neighbors behind do not look into our garden, but their large, red brick house is a backdrop. The neighbors next door do have second floor windows that look into our garden. It would be difficult to completely block their view of our garden, but we can limit them with some trellising on the top of the fence. There is also a boat repair shop nearby, but not a direct boundary. We can include sound designs to cover that occasional noise.

PASTE

What plants live on the site? This includes trees, bushes as well as smaller plants (you can include fungus if you find any too). Box Elder tree, Elderberry, Mulberries, Beautyberry, mint, lemon balm, fennel, mist flower, oatberry, grasses, cannas, columbine, turkscap, muscadine grapes and wild violets.

What animals live here, can you see any footprints, poo or paths? Our dogs, squirrels, an opossum, a cat, birds, rabbits, and something that sleeps in various places (such as the middle of the catnip or columbine plants).

What structures are there on the site - buildings, fences, rocks? It is on the southeast corner of our house. It has two houses close to the fence line. We put in a panel fence to divide the side garden from this section and there is a section of fence on the side of the rain garden that creates a “room”.

What tools do you have? How many of each? Are they in good condition? Usual garden and construction tools, wheelbarrow, dolly, truck.

What events happen on your site? How many people at the same time? Usually play or relaxing and mostly the four of us. Occasionally friends or family join us.

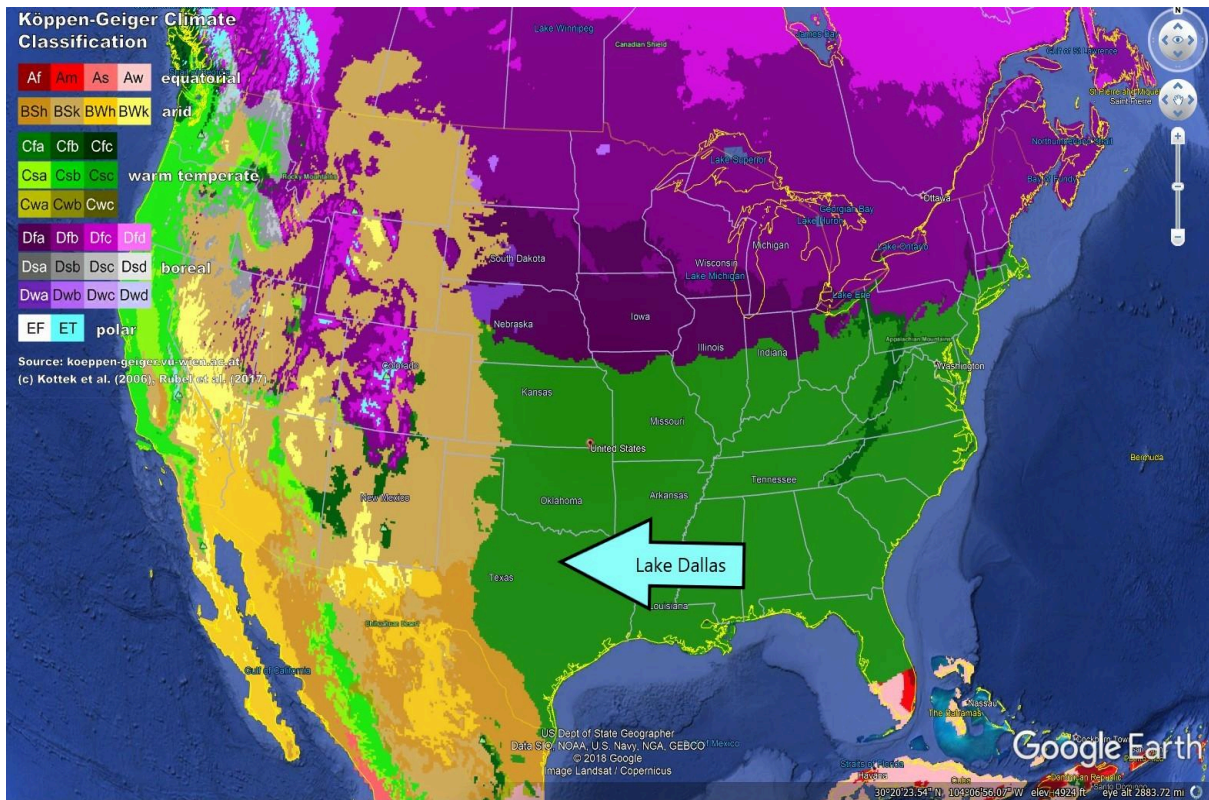
Access and desire lines

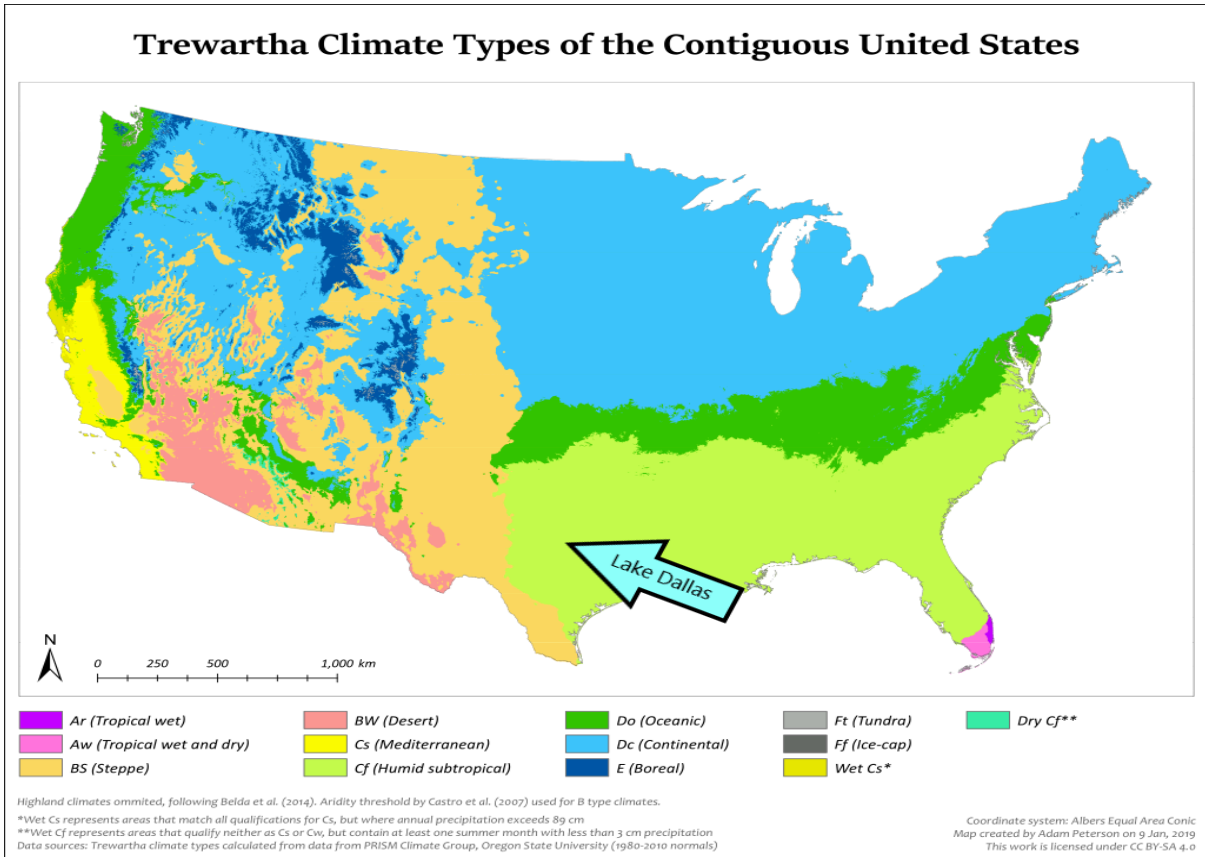
How do people get into the site? Is there a gate? We access this garden from the back door, a path from the rest of the back gardens, and from the side garden gate.

Can you see any paths at all? There is a path through the side garden, a hopscotch path through the play area, and from the porch.

Climate and weather

What biome or climate do you live in? CFA Humid Subtropical in the blackland prairie





Much more climate information on Lake Dallas can be found [here](#) from the Climate Resilience Advanced PDC course I took in 2019.

What is today's date? 11/10/2020, updated 4/6/2021

Which season is it? Fall, updated in Spring

What is the weather like today? Beautiful, mid 60's to mid 70's with a cool front coming, updated-same temps but windy.

Where is the sun at lunch time? There is sun in the southwest corner at the end of the hugel and near the fire pit.

Where are the sunny spots, in the morning and in the afternoon? Is it different in different seasons? The hugelkultur gets 4-5 hours of sun midmorning to midafternoon in spring with more sun in the summer. It gets more sun in the winter when the angle is farther south and the trees are bare.

Where does the prevalent wind come from? The prevailing wind is from the south with shelter near the Box Elder tree. In the winter it is from the north with shelter on the south side of the sunroom. Our trees provide shelter from the wind. Pathways and the porch experience the most wind.

If a hurricane comes in near Houston, it can come NW toward Dallas. It is, of course, less intense, but it can cause local flooding and tornadoes. We normally have tornadoes in the spring.

Water

Where can water come from and go to? There is a downspout that directs water near the side gate and another to the rain garden. Water flows from our uphill neighbor. The hugelkultur, rain garden and wood chips help.

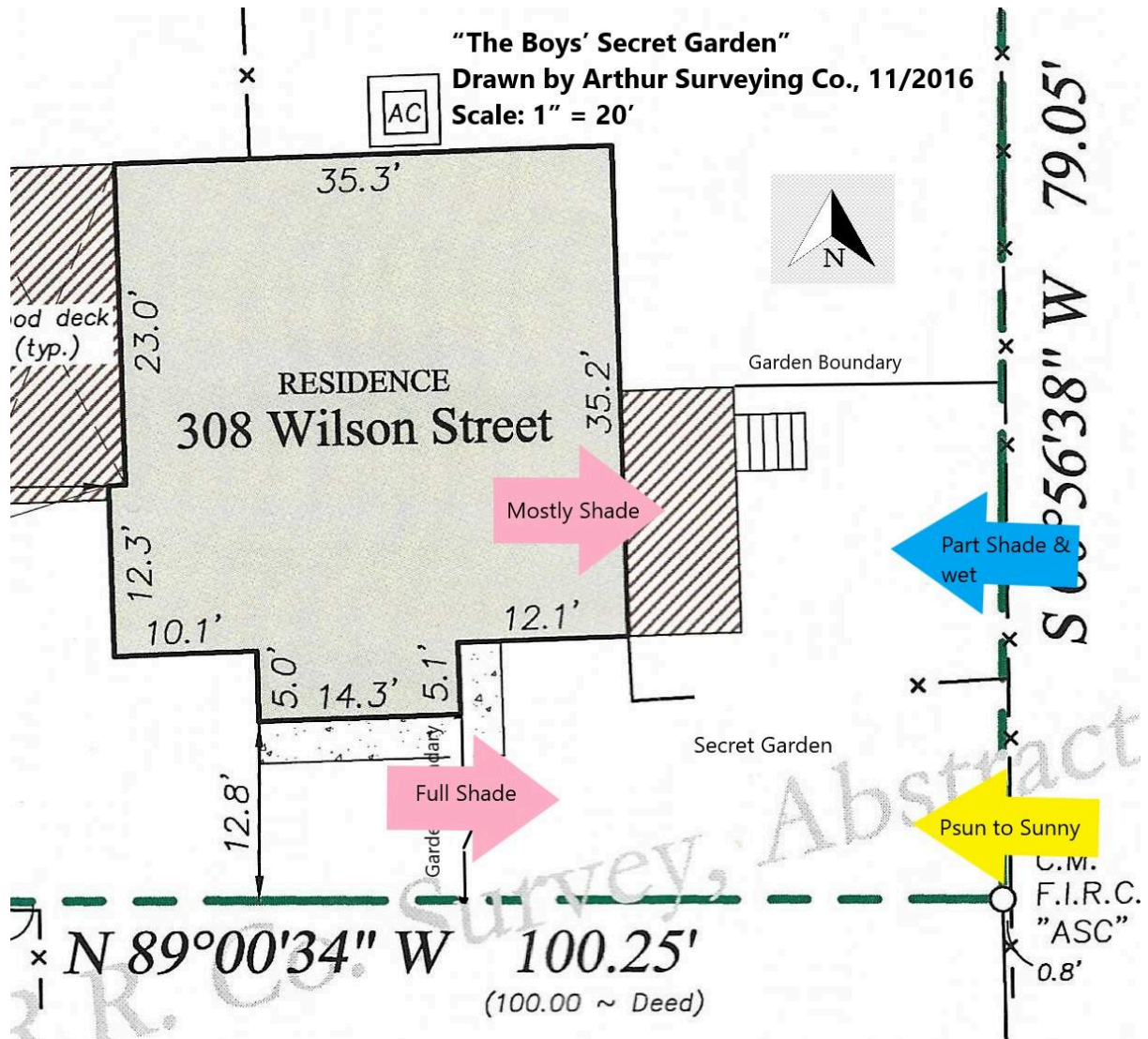
Are there any roofs which you could collect water from? Yes from the house which will be directed to a tank. The sunroom roof is directed to the rain garden.

Are there ever floods or droughts here? We are uphill and not affected by lake flooding. The wood chips, hugelkultur, and the rain garden help with water from uphill. There are droughts occasionally.

Soil

Are there different types of 'weeds' in different places? Can they tell you anything about the soil? There are wild violets near the rain garden (prefers wet and organic soil), some poison ivy (low in calcium, selenium, and phosphorus) and lamb's quarter (usually poor soil but spreads easily).

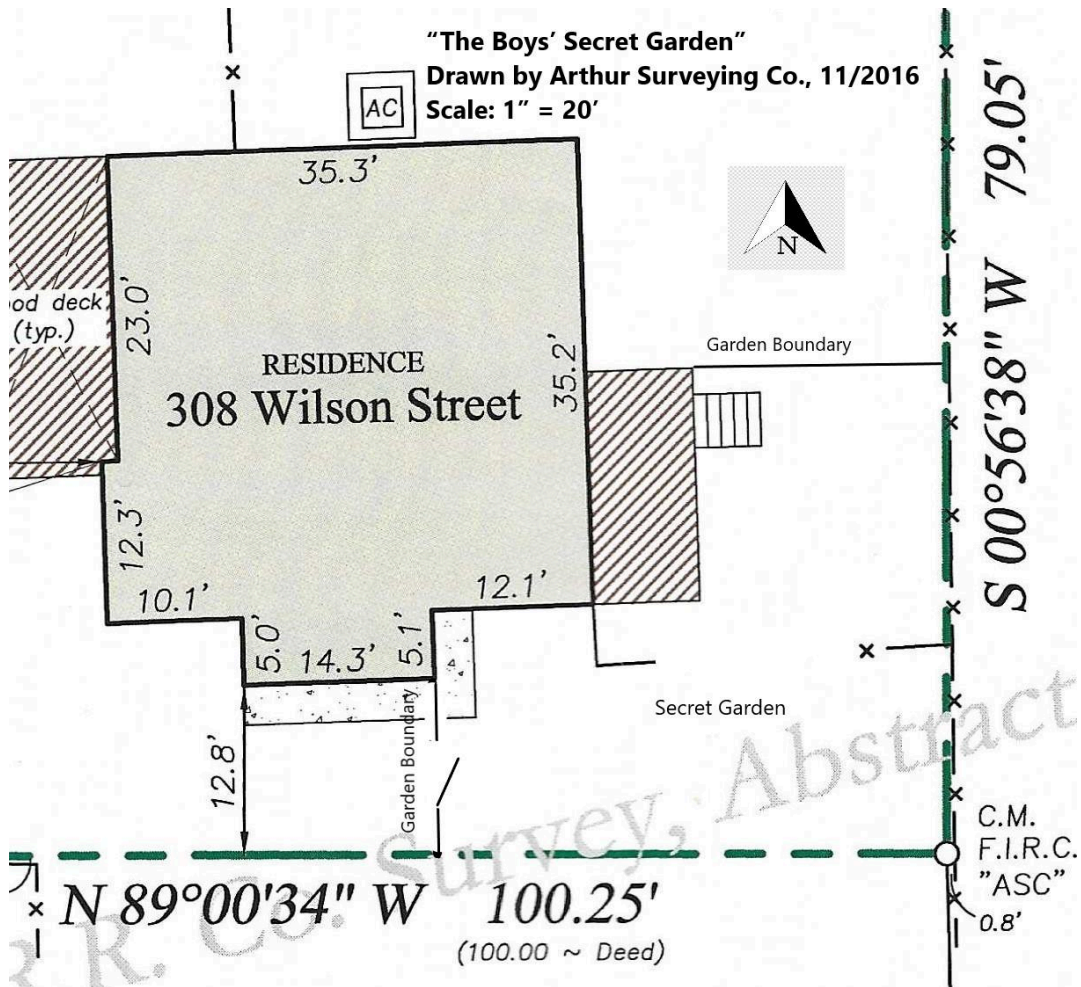
What texture of soil do you have? (sand/silt/clay/loam) Silt and clay
How deep a hole can you dig easily? 4-10" depending on the location
Is the soil acid, alkali or neutral? neutral



Mapping

Get a map of the site, make sure it only has things on it that would be difficult to move/change. Draw on it TOADS:

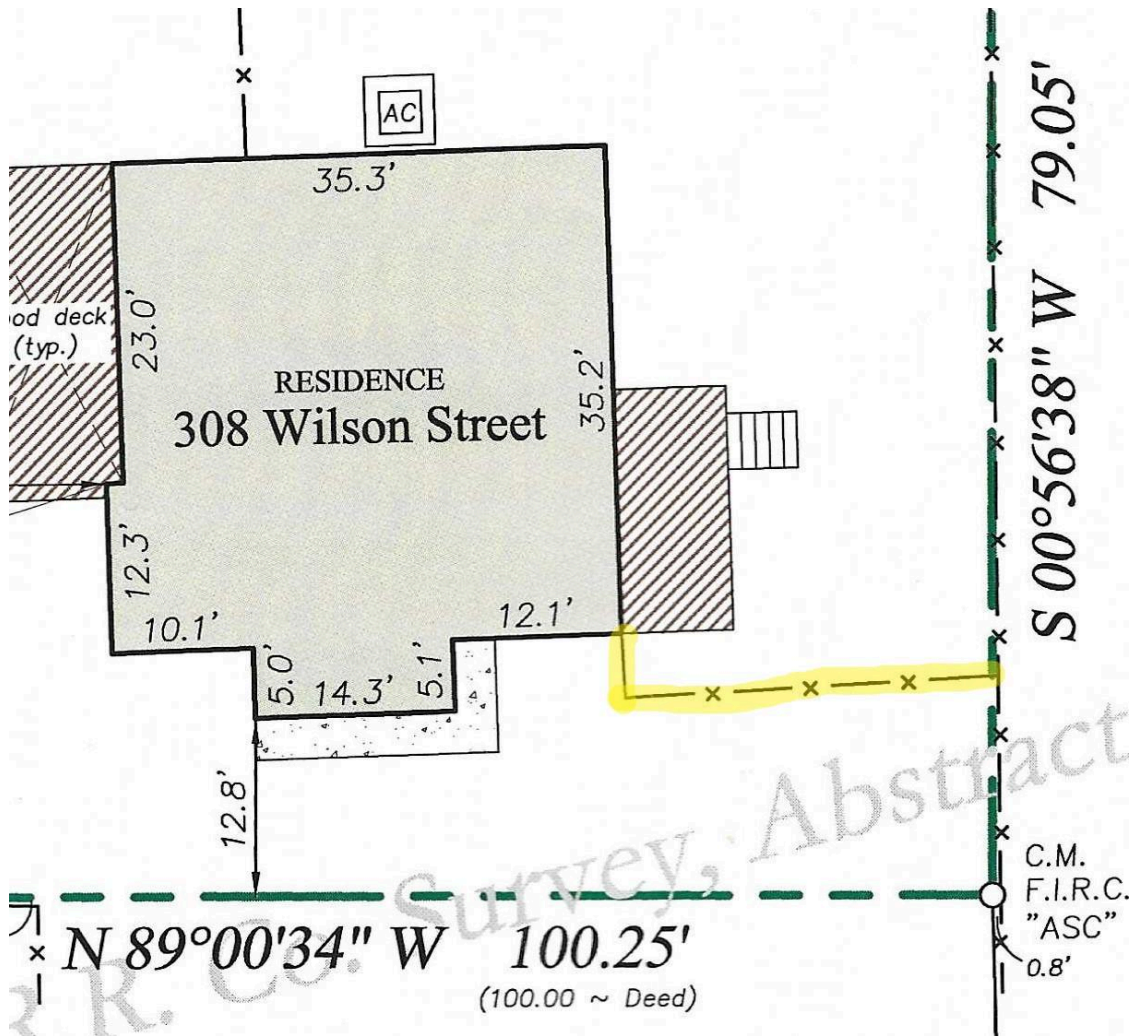
- Title - the name of the site.
- Orientation - add a North arrow.
- Author - who drew the map?
- Date - when was the map drawn?
- Scale - measure between two immovable objects on the map. Add that measurement to the map as a ruler.



History

What was the site used for in the past? [This 1930's lake cabin was a rental and was neglected](#)

Upon purchase in 2016, this area was divided by a fence (highlighted). The southern portion of the property was open to the neighbor and the road beyond. There was not a gate in the highlighted fence and access was needed around the property.



In November, 2017, we moved the fence 16 feet to our property line and layered with cardboard, soil, compost and wood chips.





A group from a horticulture club helped lay cardboard and move wood chips to the newly enclosed area.





In February, 2018 another group helped to install a hugelkultur to help with water flow issues.

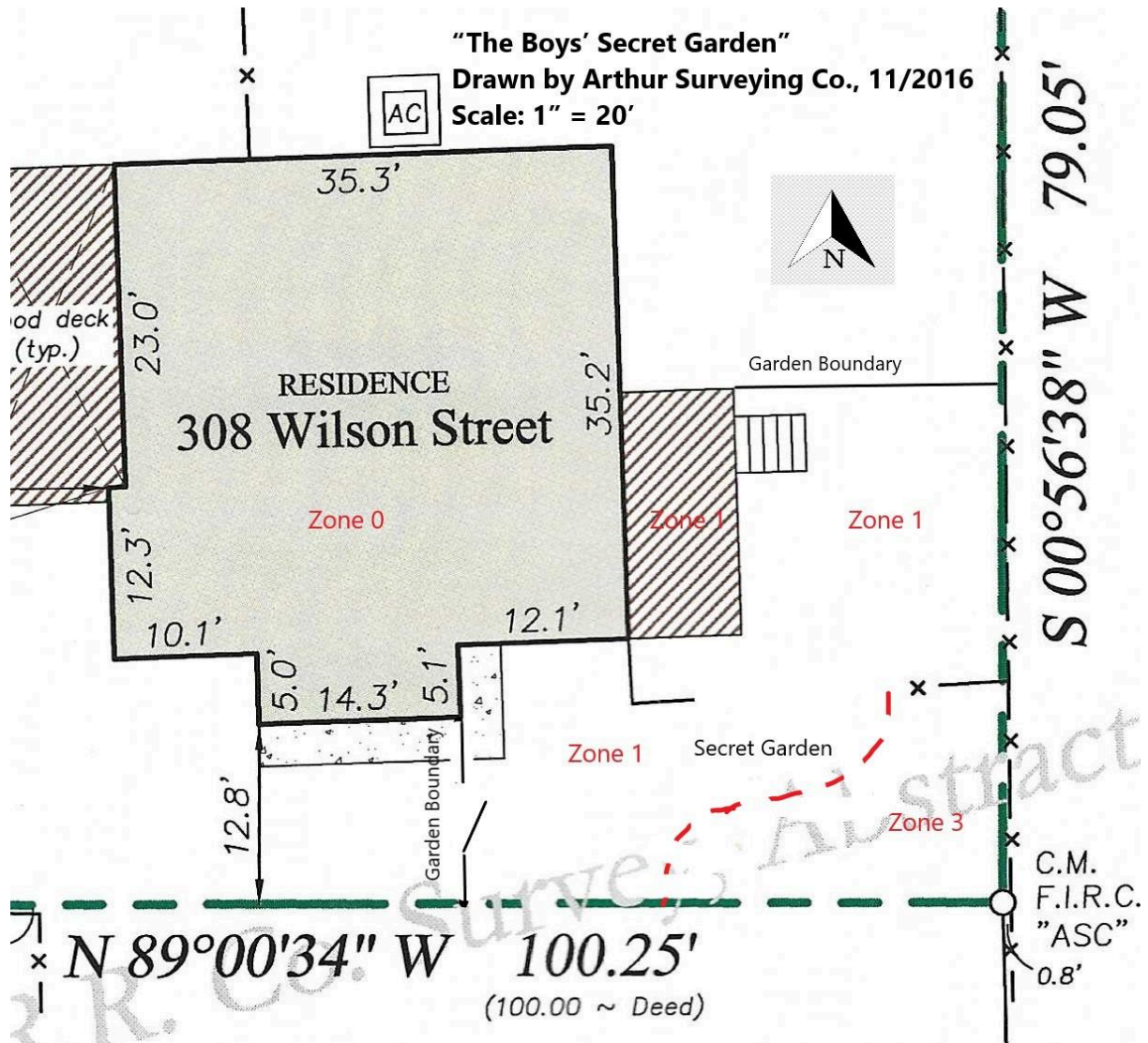
Resources

What free or low cost resources could you bring in to help you build the garden?

- Free wood chips and leaves
- Low cost soil from the city
- Cow manure
- Compost from our chickens
- Some “trash” items and tree stumps to use for the play area

Zones

What area(s) are used every day? (can you draw that on your map?)



OBSERVING PEOPLE

I've observed our family in this area on several occasions. The paths were created because of how we naturally move through the area. The boys are drawn to play in this area. We are drawn to the Box Elder tree, the rain garden, the porch and now the fire pit. Garden designs formed around those areas. The porch and rain garden were separate gardens, but naturally merged when we took two balustrades for the boys to have better access. All of these observations helped to create our design.

What's happening? (background)

One day as I trimmed the tree, the boys played while I observed. They created a fort with the cut branches against the side fence. Then they moved all of them to the back porch to create a fortress. This helped me see how the porch is part of the garden. The railing kept it separate.



Who uses the site now? (think of everyone) Before we moved the fence, we avoided the area. Now, the four of us use the area often. The dogs, the chickens and wild birds all find their way to the porch. The area is enclosed and the boys feel safe to play here as seen in these more current observations.

- [Oliver's imagination video](#)
- [Part 2 video](#)
- [The snow swing video](#)



Who will use the site once it is finished? Same as above, and maybe a few friends

Who owns the site? We do

Watch people on the site - where do they like to go? What do they do? The boys favorite thing is the swing hanging from the tree. Plus they love the climbing area including climbing through the porch railing (the best and smallest solution). My husband and I often sit by the firepit while the boys play nearby.

Who are the neighbours and what are they like? Two retired couples and they enjoy hearing the boys playing. They are not aware, however, of permaculture principles and one uses chemicals yet asks our advice on growing. There is a privacy issue with windows that face our house. Additional trellising to raise the fence height could handle that.

What do all the different people want from the site? What would all the different people like to do there?

- A yoga site
- A sound feature to cover outside sounds
- The boys want to expand the play area
- My husband enjoys taking a break there from work
- The animals want space near the sunroom windows to people watch

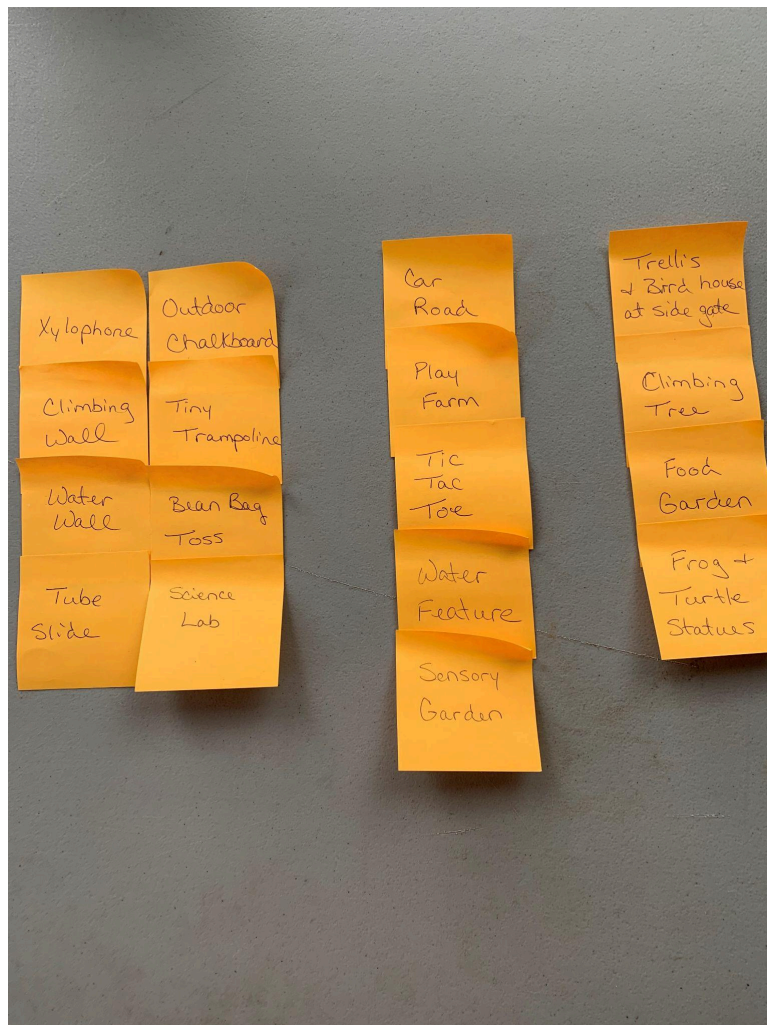
What different plants, animals, structures, tools and events would people like there? What would you love to see here? We would love plants of different colors and textures-a sensory garden, various paths and artistic areas. The boys want places to play, climb and explore. And we want places our dogs enjoy exploring.

Skills audit

What skills do you have? We have great imagination and drive. We are able to build or learn to build or create things. I have permaculture training and Steve has engineering and construction training.

Who could help you? We all work together and friends sometimes help. We could hire some tasks done like gutter work.

- The children:
 - A child-specific survey process to include their vision, dreams, or ideas for what elements (PASTE) they would like. The boys and I enjoyed writing their element list out on these sticky notes. We stuck them to the sunroom windows in the areas we thought each element belonged. The large sunroom windows were the perfect vantage point to do a little dreaming.



Analysis

Functions We Want	System	Elements
Play	Climbing Area/Porch	Tube Slide Climbing Science Lab Water Wall Trampoline Bean Bag Toss Chalkboard
	Tree/Fence Area	Xylophone Swing
	Bench/tree stumps	Tic Tac Toe Game (on tree stump)
Seating/Rest	Fire Pit area	Bench Tree stumps Fire pit
	Tree	Swing
	Porch	Bench
Wildlife Habitat and Food	Rain Garden	Pollinator Plants Habitat among plants
	Trees and fence	Nests and food in trees Bird Houses on fence
	Hugelkultur	Pollinator plants Habitat within hugel and among plants
Food for Us	Hugelkultur	Food in SW end of hugel Herbs all over
	Trees	Fruit in trees
	Porch	Herbs in pots
Security for the Boys	Fence	Safe to play unsupervised
Water Management	Hugelkultur	Water flows into hugel and sinks in ground
	Rain Garden	Water slowly sinks into ground
	Water catchment	Water is caught and used to

		water plants
Educational Areas	Climbing area and porch	Exploration Reading places Chalkboard
	Gardens	Sensory plants Pollinators Food and herbs Wildlife Art statues (frog and turtle) Trees

This exercise revealed that if we remove two balustrades from the porch railing, we can create a relationship between the porch and the secret garden. This small solution bound two areas which caused me to see them in new ways. I could see the porch as a great place for yoga for example. The risk of falling from the porch or getting scratched is minor in comparison to the benefit of having a secret entrance to their play area.

Random Assembly Propositions	Possibilities
Inside	Water feature or wall containing or inside of the climbing wall-could be a safety issue, but interesting thought.
Over	Climbing wall over the trampoline-works if the trampoline is on the ground and you have to jump to reach for the handhold.
On top of	Water feature on top of the climbing wall-could be on the porch-again had not thought of that.
Through	Remove the balustrades to climb through the railing
Below	Climbing wall below the tiny trampoline-if the trampoline were on the porch and a small climbing wall was the side of the porch it would work-we hadn't thought of that before.

Site Assessment Form

Location: Oliver's Gardens, Secret Garden		Name: Annette Argabright		Grid Ref:		Date: 11/30/2020			
Description of site / activity / tools: (owner, debris, dogs, flora & fauna, access, trees, porch, fences) Owner: Annette Argabright Main hazards: Poison Ivy, Insect bites or stings, snakes, falls/cuts/scrapes, dog or chicken poop, sun Probability? Every time(5), most times (4), occasionally(3), rarely(2), hardly ever(1) Severity? Fatal (5), emergency hospitalisation (4), non-emergency hospitalisation (3 e.g. sprained ankle, cut needs stitches), first aid on site (2), no adult intervention other than TLC (1).									
Hazard	Harm	People at Risk	Benefit	P	S	R	Existing preventative measures or new measures that need to be implemented	Who will do it? When?	
				Probability (1-5)	Severity (1-5)	Rating (1-5)			
1	Low fence and gate	climb and fall or get scratched	kids	Learn to navigate climbing over, learn to judge distance, exercise, have fun	3	2	3	Learn to be aware of dangers before climbing or open the gate	All of us should learn to always check
2	Saucer Swing	Dizzy and nauseous	kids	Learn their place in space, fun if you like to spin	4	1	2	Don't spin if it makes you sick	Kids
3	Tree	Fall from the platform when built. Scraped or hit foot, hand or head on tree when swinging.	kids	Engage with the tree, pretend in the tree, exercise from climbing, fun pushing off the tree when swinging	3	3	5	Make sure any climbing pieces have good footing and handholds, talk with kids about keeping hands, feet and head inside the saucer swing to avoid hitting the tree.	all
4	Porch	Falling off the steps or the open end, scrapes or cuts, other injuries.	All	Learning how to climb safely, slow down when the porch is wet, be aware of loose pieces that can cause injury.	3	3	5	Talk with the boys about climbing safety and walking slowly when the porch is wet as it can be slippery. We should all be aware of nails/screws coming loose or other potential hazards.	all
5	Insects	Fire ants can swarm and cause allergic reactions. Brown recluse spiders can also cause bad reactions wasps or bee stings as well as mosquito bites	all	Learn to observe habitats and the behavior of insects. Learn to respect wildlife.	1	3	8	Check site for ant mounds. Clean debris and sweep porch often. Teach kids about habitats and what to look for.	all
						2	5	Check site for nests and sweep often.	

6	Snakes	While most of our snakes are harmless, they can still bite and a couple are venomous	All	Learn to observe habitats and the behavior of insects. Learn to respect wildlife. Learn to be aware of surroundings at all times.	1	5	8	Remove debris and do a snake check daily in spring and summer. Teach the kids to be aware and how to respect snakes.	all
7	Weather	Our space is near the house but severe weather can occur suddenly in spring	all	Learn about weather and how to dress for the occasion. Be aware of the forecast for the day.	3	3	3	Be aware of the forecast. Provide the appropriate clothing for the season and weather. Do not venture out when the weather is extreme.	all
8	Poison Ivy	Can cause an annoying rash	All	Children can learn about all plants and how some have adverse reactions. Learn respect for all plants. Learn how to apply remedies if they come in contact.	3	2	5	Check the area frequently for poison ivy and keep it under control. Teach the kids what it looks like and how to avoid it when they find it. Show them where the herbal remedy is and how to apply it.	all
9	Dog or chicken poop	It can make a mess or cause an infection	All	Learn to be aware of their surroundings and where they are stepping. They can learn to be responsible for animals.	4	1	2	Scoop regularly and teach the kids to be aware of poop in the walkway or play areas.	all
10	Sunburn	Painful burn	all	Learn about the sun and its benefits. Learn how to protect themselves from burning. Enjoy the warmth.	4	2	4	Offer shade areas or create more during the summer. Offer proper clothing and protection.	all
11	Swing	The swing could hit someone	all	Become aware of people around them. Being cautious when walking near the swing.	2	3	5	Remind kids to be cautious of others when swinging.	all
<p>Your comments If visiting this site/activity/tool, your recommendations will be followed.</p> <p>Your main concerns: To make sure we remove areas that would invite snake or harmful insect/spider habitat. Monitoring cut/scratch potentials.</p> <p>Your main positive features: That we have such a beautiful space to devote to play and plants. The porch that was once separate in my mind is now a part of the space we are designing which I love.</p>					<p>Your recommendations Remove debris and carefully check the area for harmful plants, or things that could cause cuts.</p>				

To do each day:

Observe to gain a deeper knowledge of the plants and creatures that live or frequent that space. Listen to become aware of how we fit in instead of how to fit the space to us.

Design

Draw or otherwise represent (e.g. 3D model) your design showing the layout of the different elements which you chose in analysis.

I continued on with the clay design that we began in the CiP course. I struggled at first, but enjoyed the creativity found within it. This [video link](#) shows more of the spaces we imagine.



Ethics within the Design



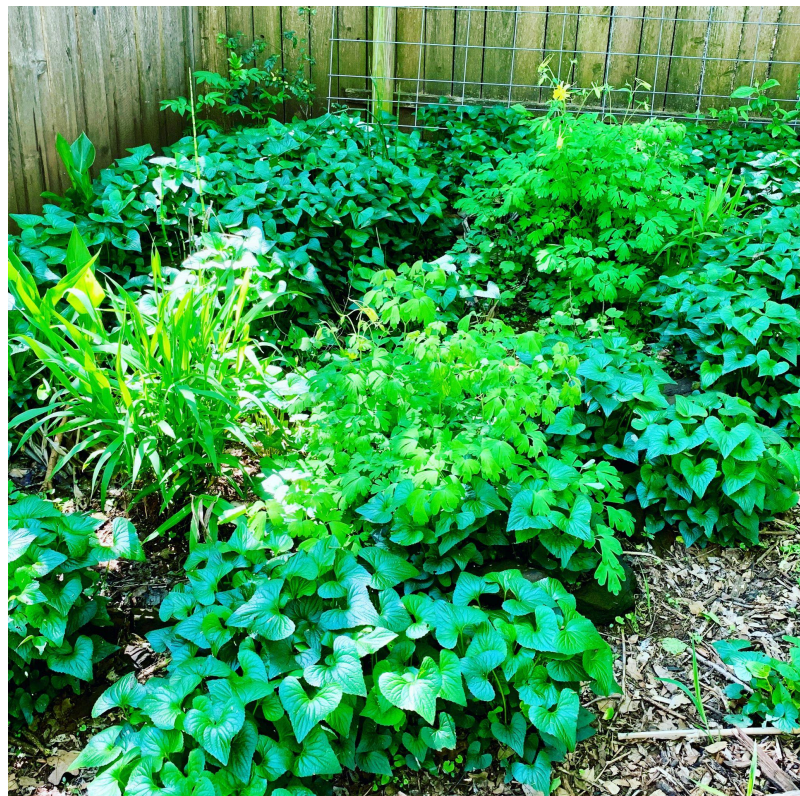
Permaculture Principles within this Design	
Observe & interact	Lots of people and land observation
Catch & store energy	The rain garden and hugelkultur store water. The design as a whole catches and stores life.
Obtain a yield	Yields here include food from plants, housing for wildlife, fun and relaxation for people
Apply self regulation and accept feedback	Through listening to the land and children, we were able to create an incredible space.
Use and value renewable resources and services	The wood chips as well as the boys' energy
Produce no waste	Materials used in the play space
Design from patterns to details	Stepping back to see the inclusion of the porch and rain garden
Integrate rather than segregate	Including the boys and their needs created a much better garden
Use small & slow solutions	Multiple phases over a few years
Use & value diversity	We included the boys' needs, my desire for unique garden design, a fire pit, and wildlife needs.
Use edges & value the marginal	Removing 2 little balustrades in the porch railing opened a whole new space by creating a secret entrance.
Creatively use & respond to change	The original design was put on hold while the boys are with us.

Implementation

What is the plan for implementing your design? Who? How much money? How much time? When? Do you need a plan A and a plan B?

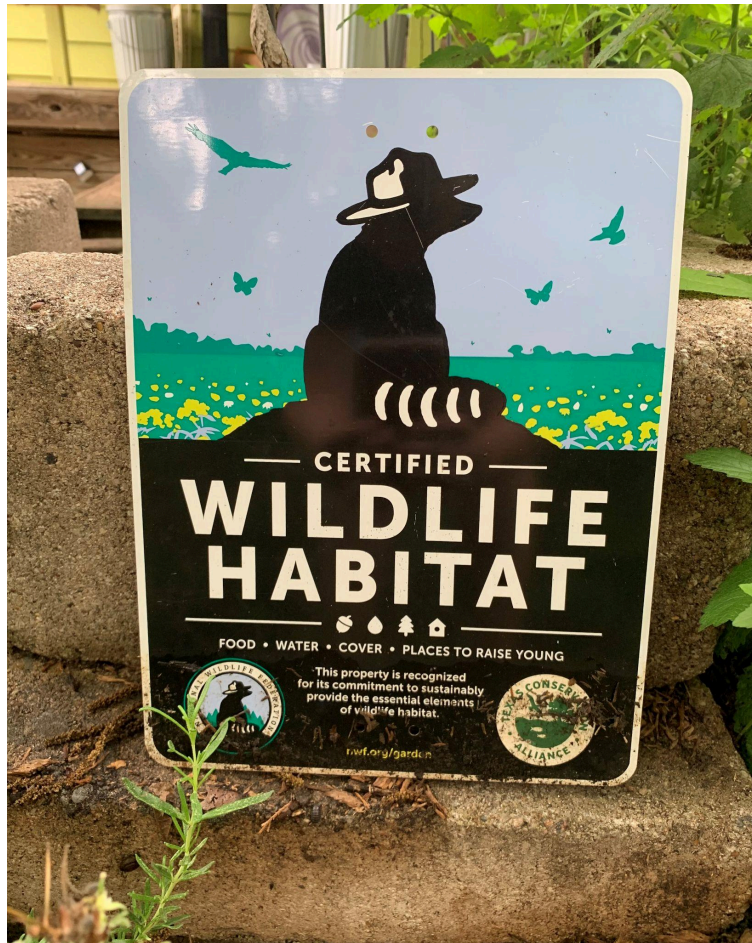
Project	Phase	When	Time?	Money?
Extend Fence Wood chips	A	2017	2 days	\$200
Hugel	B	2018	1 day	\$30
Rain garden Swing Nature Loom Small gardens	C	2019	2 months	\$300 for swing and plants
Climbing area Fire pit	D	2021	2 days	\$50 for fire brick. Used materials laying around for rest
Xylophone Water wall Games	E	Summer of 2021	2 days	~\$50
Trellis Water catchment	F	2022	2 weeks	\$200

In 2019 I had a small grant. One project that was completed was this rain garden. In it was planted elderberry, Oat Straw, Columbine, Turks Cap, Cannas, Horsetail, and I allowed the Wild Violets to grow.





[Video of Gavin enjoying the tires](#)



Maintenance

What maintenance will be required and when? E.g. You could make a table which shows the monthly tasks once the design is implemented.

Task	Schedule
Watering	2x/week if no rain
Poop scooping	Daily
Weeding	Monthly
Checking play area for safety issues	Weekly
Picking up loose parts and possibly adding more	Weekly
Trimming tree suckers on Box Elder	Monthly
Checking for wasp nests and poison ivy	Weekly
Burning branches that have accumulated	Monthly or as needed based on burn bans

Evaluation

Does the design meet the design brief? I believe it does

What went well? Moving the fence, the wood chips, the hugel and rain garden, and building the climbing space and swing. The random assembly exercise showed us how we could stack functions and most fit within the climbing space.

What was difficult? Stepping back and listening to what the space was saying to me was hard. Moving the fence opened up many new possibilities.

Functions We Want	System	Elements	What went well? What was difficult?
Play	Climbing Area/Porch	Tube Slide Climbing Science Lab Water Wall Trampoline Bean Bag Toss Chalkboard	There simply is not room for a slide in this garden, but there is a nearby playground that has slides. We were able to create a climbing area, a science lab, and a bean bag toss (using the ladder sections of the bunkbed piece). The water wall has not been installed yet, but will work. The trampoline will not work well here so we are taking that off the list. Instead of a chalkboard, we have several large windows that work well for erasable markers and finger paint.
	Tree/Fence Area	Xylophone Swing	The swing is the favorite element in the garden. We might need to put a water catchment tank where the xylophone was due to go so we need to rethink that.
	Bench/tree stumps	Tic Tac Toe Game (on tree stump)	The rocks have been painted (green acid and red fire), but the lines have not been painted on the stump. The boys enjoy the rocks more than the game so this is not in a rush.
Seating/Rest	Fire Pit area	Bench Tree stumps Fire pit	We have a bench and a couple stumps. They make great seating and steps for when there is lava all around. Sadly we have to take an old, large tree down so we will enjoy it by making more seating.
	Tree	Swing	This tree is beautiful and thick in the spring so swinging is very peaceful.
	Porch	Bench	This works well and also serves to hold my laptop to do yoga on the

			porch.
Wildlife Habitat and Food	Rain Garden	Pollinator Plants Habitat among plants	The dogs, chickens and wildlife like to spend time in the rain garden so some plants did not make it. We also had a historical freeze and lost more. But it is a favorite place for them.
	Trees and fence	Nests and food in trees Bird Houses on fence	We do have a family of birds in one of the bird houses and a few nests in the Box Elder tree.
	Hugelkultur	Pollinator plants Habitat within hugel and among plants	The freeze somehow caused the hugel to collapse, which I've heard from others in the area. I need to build it back into a small hugel with a swale behind.
Food for Us	Hugelkultur	Food in SW end of hugel Herbs all over	The large trees created shade in the sun area so I am unable to grow more than herbs. That is ok though.
	Trees	Fruit in trees	The elderberry grew quite a bit this year.
	Porch	Herbs in pots	I have mint, echinacea, aloe, thyme, coral bells, and lemon verbena growing.
Security for the Boys	Fence	Safe to play unsupervised	The boys play outside regularly
Water Management	Hugelkultur	Water flows into hugel and sinks in ground	It does sink into the ground and it is often spongy, but the hugel sunk with the freeze.
	Rain Garden	Water slowly sinks into ground	Rain gardens work perfectly on my property. I will be adding them all over.
	Water catchment	Water is caught and used to water plants	I have gotten a quote for gutters and will be installing soon. The catchment tank is in place.
Educational Areas	Climbing area and porch	Exploration Reading places Chalkboard	Exploration is in large supply! And we often read and do school while swinging or on the bench. The windows instead of the chalkboard have not been used much yet.
	Gardens	Sensory plants Pollinators Food and herbs	We do have several herbs and textured plants. We will have some pollinator plants, but not much

		Wildlife Art statues (frog and turtle) Trees	food. We do have wildlife in the garden. We have not had a chance to create our art, but are looking forward to it.
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Update Evaluation 2/18/2024

This space is still referred to as the Secret Garden but there have been some changes. The xylophone and the trellis over the gate never came to be, but we did add in a hammock where we read together, more stumps to extend their path, and footholds that we wrapped around the tree to help with climbing. The sandbox has been moved and is now a pool for the chickens to drink from or wade in during the summer.

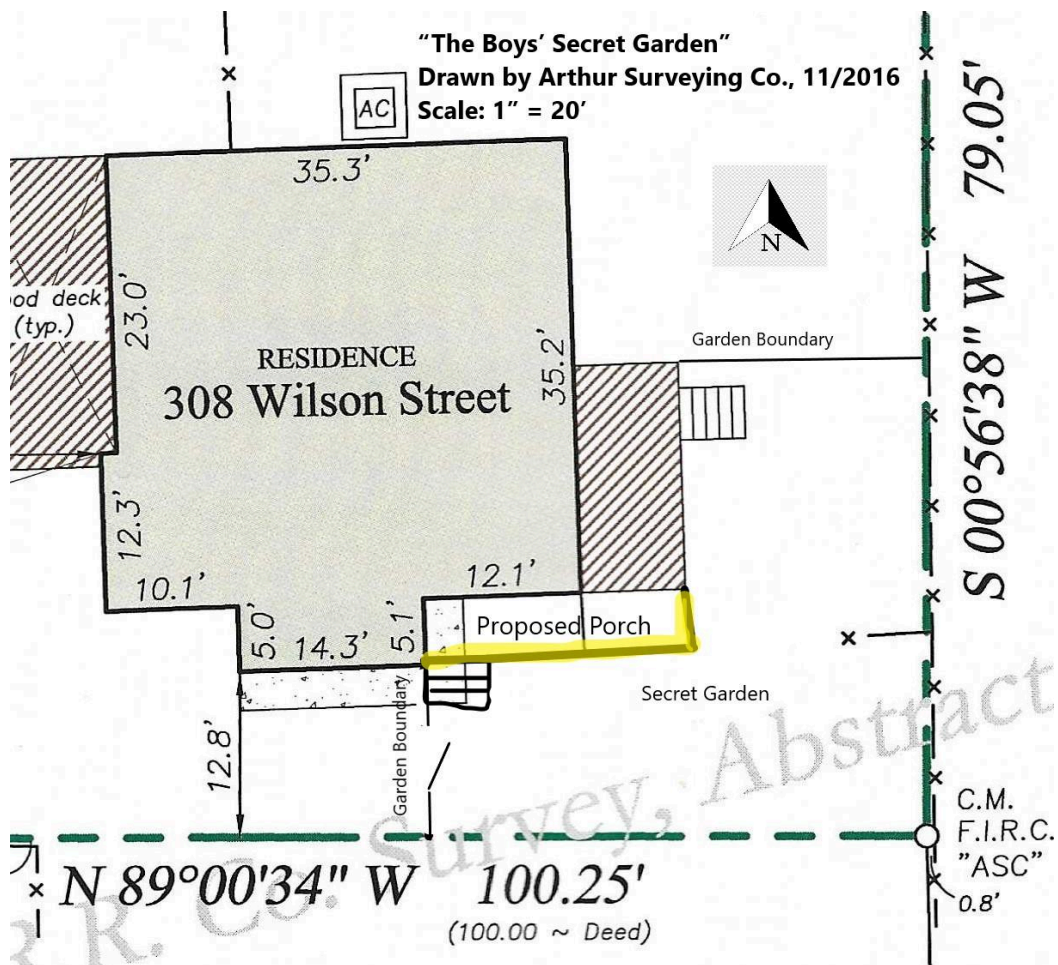
The favorite elements remain the disc swing and the secret passage, which is used by the chickens as well.

Tweak

Did the design change during the implementation process? The design changed several times during the various implementation phases such as moving the fence and the boys moving in.

How would you do it differently if you were to do it again? I would observe longer

How will the design have to change over time? Eventually we might remove the play area to wrap the porch to the side of the sunroom or install a hot tub.



Reflection

What did you enjoy or learn from the design process? It forced me to slow down, observe more, and think through the process more deeply. This was my first exposure to several of these tools. This [audio link](#) explains more of my thought process.

How did you find the tools which you used?

The Random Assembly was eye opening to our possibilities. It helped me see options beyond what I could imagine. Because of using that tool, I was able to stack some of our functions in a smaller space. It gave the boys more open space to play.

Thinking through the Functions and Elements within PASTE was also very useful. It helped to show us where things might work better and that some things simply don't belong in this space such as a slide.

Slowing down and using various ways to observe the children in the space as well as outside of the space reminded me of their scientific and curious natures. Trying to find a way to include sound such as a xylophone came from that.

And working through the principles helped me to align all of the functions and elements in a more sustainable and cohesive way within the Secret Garden. Examples of this include

blending the porch with the space, including everyone's needs as much as possible, and putting some things on hold until the time is right.