

WRITTEN BY
MARY ANN NEWCOMER
PRODUCED BY
SUSAN APPELEGET HURST
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
BRIE PASSANO



1



BACK- ALLEY REVAMP



2

A BOISE COUPLE
THINKS BEYOND
THE FENCE
TO CREATE A
NEIGHBORHOOD
GATHERING PLACE
FILLED WITH
**FLOWERS, FRUIT,
AND FRIENDS.**



1 Before the alley was paved, it was a typical dusty, weedy lane. Now it is full of life and, occasionally, chalk art.

2 Trash cans display a showy side when they overflow with zinnias.

THIS PHOTO
Blueberries thrive in raised beds with specially amended soil.



zinnia



Linda + Devin

According to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, an alley is “a garden or park walk bordered by trees or bushes.” For most Americans who live with rear-access alleyways, that’s an unusually picturesque way to describe a typically unkempt rutted lane bordered by fences and decorated by garbage carts. But to creative



pears

TRELLISES
Prewelded galvanized-wire fencing panels create trellises along the alley. The panels are securely attached to cedar posts at least 6 inches from fences and walls, providing good air circulation for growing plants and access for harvesting and pruning.

ALLEY ACCESS
Although most neighbors have fences that border the alley, they also have backyard-access entrances, each displaying their own personalities. SNOW Block neighbors can also easily keep an eye on their kids at play in the alley.

RAINWATER TANK
To pave the alley, SNOW Block residents needed to comply with stormwater management codes. Several 210-gallon water storage tanks collect rainwater from gutters on garage roofs. The stored water is used to water plants in the alley.

and community-minded people such as Linda Whittig and Devin Koski, the dictionary definition represents a garden vision, and their Boise neighborhood adjacent to the historic Washington Elementary School proves what imagination and resourcefulness can do. The resulting garden and neighborhood gathering space in a former alley now proudly wears the name SNOW

(Somewhere North of Washington) Block and has become home to berries, pears, herbs, chickens, chalk artists, roller bladers, outdoor movie nights, and casual cocktail hours with the neighbors.

Boise’s historic North End neighborhood has blocks and blocks of homes with little space for gardens. “These North End lots are all small with lots of shade.



LITTLE FREE LIBRARY
Part of a nationwide trend, SNOW Block has its own Little Free Library, Charter No. 30061. Devin Koski built the glass-front library as well as some other features in the alley.

RAISED BEDS
Some plants, such as fruit trees, are planted in amended soil at the level of the pavement, but sturdy raised beds protect vegetables and berries. Local nurseries and businesses donated some of the plants, soil mix, and lumber.

APPLES AND PEARS
Espaliered fruit trees (fruit trees trained to grow flat instead of outward) flank both sides of the sunniest end of the alley. Dwarf pear and apple trees do very well when pruned and trellised this way.



1



lavender



basil

We were running out of gardening space for vegetables in our small, very shady backyard. Then we thought about the alley!" Linda says. "We thought, *What if we fixed it up?*" What started as a wish to grow blackberries on a sunny patch of fence in the alley soon turned into a complete reimagining of the shared space. Discussions over neighborhood potlucks and social events revealed wishes for a closer community as well as gardens, and eventually the block's homeowners developed a plan to totally transform the alley.

Ten families eventually signed on for cooperative canvassing, fund-raising, and making helpful connections. Paving the alley was pricey, but because they presented realistic plans and proof of neighborhood support, the local highway district agreed to donate the materials, while the homeowners paid for the labor. Neighbors pitched in with sleeves rolled up, their hands in garden gloves. A neighborhood grant was successfully applied for, donations from garden centers and other suppliers were secured, planter boxes were built, and rainwater storage tanks were installed.

The eaves of the garages are lighted with festive LED rope lights, and the paved alley has become a safe place for kids to play long after the sun goes down while parents chat away or try their own skateboarding skills. Kids stop to nab ripe cherry tomatoes or blackberries, and they stay for a moment to watch the "chicken TV" cut into one family's backyard fence. Good ideas have turned the alley into a charming, productive neighborhood space—one that is still growing.



2



3

1 One end of the alley is too shady for fruit or vegetables, but other plants, such as hydrangeas, add color.

2 Linda Whittig salvaged rusty tools for decor on the fence. Sections of gutter are planted with colorful succulents.

3 This Little Free Library is open 24/7, and the SNOW Block residents share books for all ages here.

4 Four-legged neighbor George takes a peek at pink petunias that beautify a garage wall.

5 Tomatoes climb trellises in the alley's raised beds.

6 Although less than 3 feet deep, raised beds along the alley provide plenty of garden space.



4



blackberries



5



6



chicken T.V.



est. 2015

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

SNOW Block is successful because of ongoing conversations and neighborhood consensus, and as with all healthy relationships, that takes effort.

"We have loads of impromptu barbecues and gatherings, but we also have a flexible calendar of events to keep the excitement and sense of place going strong," Linda Whittig says. "We do 'Alleyween' pumpkin carving, decorate for Christmas, and hold National Night Out. We recently added a corn hole game, which is very popular." Linda and husband Devin Koski were the primary instigators of the project and continue to be cheerleaders and informal managers. "Maintenance and problem-solving have been pretty much up to us, but we don't mind keeping the alley in tip-top shape," Linda says. "We fix broken sprinkler lines. When the trash guys run into the raised beds, we fix them. When the lights under the eaves on the garage break, we fix them." It's not all up to the couple, however. "For big issues, we will discuss it as a group and solve it that way," Linda says.

1 Linda and Devin (at left) chat with friends at one of their neighborhood get-togethers in the alley. 2 The SNOW Block logo on the game board signals a good time on a summer evening.



2



say hi to Bacon

BUILT TOUGH

Some of the raised beds in SNOW Block alley are made of precast landscape blocks, but if the garbage truck gets a little too close, the blocks and plantings take a tumble. Devin Koski created a sturdier solution for the beds.

1 Devin designed a wood box form for a long post with slots for holding cedar boards, and a base that is buried in the ground.



1



2

2 The post is cast upside down in reinforced concrete with two lengths of rebar. The concrete is allowed to cure for at least 10 days before disassembling the form and removing the post.

3 The post is flipped over and the unnotched half of the post is buried and anchored with concrete. Boards are slipped into notches in the top half of the post to create the sides of the raised bed. **CC**



concrete solution



3

For more information, see Resources on page 103.