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If You Build It, They Will Play

Twin Cities families bring fun and games to their backyards

BY SUSAN DAVIS PRICE

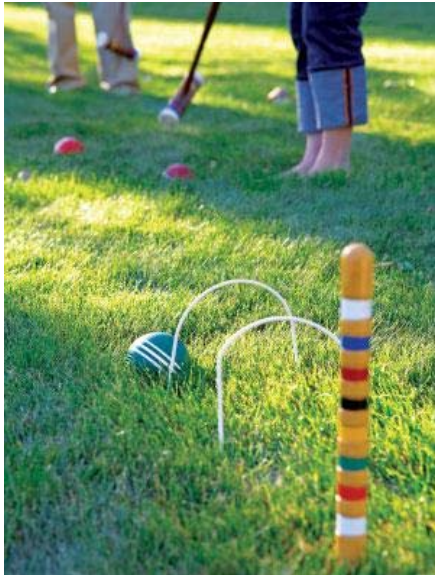


PHOTO BY MAKI STRUNC PHOTOGRAPHY

Putting greens, enormous in-ground Scrabble boards, giant-sized croquet lawns. Amenities at a luxury resort? Nope. They might be in your neighbor's backyard, as many Twin Citians transform their lawns into fun and functional spaces to play and entertain.

Six-Wicket

Jennifer Vervoort-Smith of Orono has always loved croquet. "We played the game as kids at our cabin," she says. In re-designing her landscape, the owner of Moroccan import shop Soleil Brule in Wayzata decided to make a large croquet lawn the centerpiece. Her flair for interior design came in handy when planning the space. Vervoort-Smith brought in the expertise of Heidi Heiland, owner of Heidi's Lakeshore Gardens in Corcoran, to help her redesign the landscaping.

To create some sunny space at the front of her 6-acre lot for the croquet lawn, she cleared a portion of the nearby woods, leaving a large grove of pines for privacy. The Lawn Firm of Long Lake prepared the uneven ground and planted with Hydroseed—a grass seed that is sprayed on in a mixture of mulch—and fertilizer in preparation for the games. "It grew in thickly right away, perfect for croquet," Vervoort-Smith says. With lawn furniture and accessories from her specialty shop, the setting is tinged with movie-set glamour.

"This has been a wonderful addition for the extended family and friends," Vervoort-Smith says. "All generations can play. Grandparents can join in, and my two teenage boys and their friends think it's great. We play a round whenever we get together."

Fore

"We can bring our vacation to the house rather than adding to our responsibilities with a cabin," says Nikki Steele of Medina. Nikki and her husband, Craig, are avid golfers. So when it came time to design their yard, they thought, Why not a golf theme? By the time their landscape designer, Don Felix of Signature Patio, was finished, the Steeles had two putting greens, a water feature, and a tee box up on a hill with a net to practice pitching. They even had a



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In St. Paul, word-game aficionados Lisa Reiter and Todd Turfler chose Scrabble as their backyard motif. The entire family, including Lisa's father, are enthusiastic Scrabble players. "That's how I got along so well with Lisa's dad right away," Todd explains. "We're both crossword and Scrabble buffs."

When HGTV's "Landscapes Smart" program selected the Reiters for a feature on the show, they were thrilled, because the network often gets donated materials, allowing show participants to build a \$30,000 landscape for less than \$10,000. "We had recently moved from another home where we'd done over the yard ourselves," Lisa says. "We wanted a place for our three children to enjoy, but we weren't eager to tackle another makeover alone." In tossing around possible ideas with Don Felix, who was introduced to the family by HGTV producers, Todd came up with the Scrabble theme.

Then they proceeded to make every details authentic. The "board" is constructed of tinted pavers, and pathways using the same pavers that unify the landscape's design. Comfortable wooden benches, built by local carpenter, Shawn Powers, are modeled after the game's tile racks and placed adjacent to the in-ground "board" for easy playing. True to the actual Scrabble game, there are exactly 100 tiles, but these are 6-by-6-inch plywood squares with spray-painted letters. Tables resembling letter tiles are actually concrete pads stacked askew on top of one another. Mulched areas and sturdy plants make for easy maintenance. And a deck, grill, and firepit help make the backyard a great place to gather.

The Scrabble board has been a great draw in the neighborhood, Todd says. "In the beginning, people were curious to see what HGTV had done," he says. "But folks really love the Scrabble idea. We're out there with our kids all season long."

Regardless of the game, all three playful landscapes have delighted their owners. They are relatively easy to maintain, match the families' interests and enthusiasms, and fit smoothly into the surrounding landscapes. Who needs a resort?

Susan Davis Price is a Minneapolis writer and Master Gardener.

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