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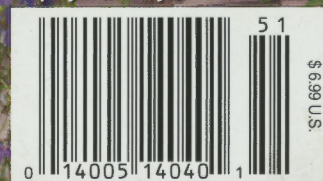
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A photograph of a young family in their urban backyard. A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a blue patterned dress, stands in the background. A man with short brown hair, wearing a blue shirt, is crouching in the middle ground. A young girl with dark hair, wearing a pink dress and a pink hat, is standing in the foreground holding a yellow squash. They are surrounded by lush green plants, including large-leafed vegetables like zucchini. The backyard is enclosed by a wooden fence and a wooden deck. The overall atmosphere is bright and sunny.

# A Bite-Size Boston Backyard

A young family makes the most of their small slice of the city—on a budget.

Kara Lashley, Lyle Bradley, and their daughter, Lily, spend their summers in their incredible edible urban backyard.



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Written & produced by **Tovah Martin**  
Photography by **Kindra Clineff**

Lyle and his family didn't miss a beat in their sliver-size East Boston backyard. In addition to two green roofs, they host a work shed, raised vegetable beds, fruit and berry vines, flowerbeds, plus a deck and grilling area.





**Above left:** The mudroom doubles as a greenhouse, thanks to salvaged sliding glass doors set horizontally.



**Above middle:** The garden is not only dedicated to the table: Between beds filled with kale, tomatoes, Swiss chard, and peppers, Kara tucked in some zinnias.



**Above right:** Lyle skips the kitchen, going straight from garden to grill, whisking dinner up to the deck dining area.

## Fresh out of architecture school, Lyle Bradley had a seemingly delusional

checklist in hand when he went house hunting in 2005. Realistically, where was he going to find an affordable single-family home with its own yard in Boston proper? And you can imagine how the real estate agents rolled their eyes when he threw in a request for a south-facing yard. But one redeeming factor made the whole improbable list slightly feasible. When Lyle mentioned he was willing to tackle a serious fixer-upper, the telephone started ringing.

And that's how Lyle Bradley and Kara Lashley came to the little rowhouse in East Boston. To hear Lyle tell it, the "cozy" home was the sole affordable property in the city—and he snagged it. The fact that it needed serious interior renovations didn't faze the architect. But the backyard was slightly daunting. As far as condition goes, "It was horrendous," Kyle says. Initially, the new homeowners had their hands full getting the inside up to speed. But even then part of their focus was outward bound—converting a screen porch into a year-round "greenhouse." The idea came from observing their neighbors in this Italian multigenerational neighborhood. "The

Italians love their fruit," Lyle says. "Traditionally, they brought lemon trees inside into a warm place." With orangeries as inspiration, he saw a purpose for what was formerly a mudroom.


That's when Lyle began scavenging. The sliding doors that a neighbor no longer needed were just the ticket, he figured, if he turned them sideways to serve as removable windows. Voilà—they haWd a place to start seedlings and grow herbs just footsteps from the kitchen. As for the "greenhouse" roof, Lyle wasn't going to leave that real estate overlooked—it became his first foray into green roofs. Determined to do his part to make Boston a cooler, greener place, he retrofitted rubber roofing, a layer of gravel, mesh screen, and landscape fabric before adding flats of low-growing sedums.

Meanwhile, the backyard was crying for redemption. After Lyle and Kara carted away the aboveground pool, the space was wide open for innovation inspired by the neighborhood's roots. "There are a lot of fruit trees from two or three generations ago," Lyle says. Nearby yards nurture remnants of old grape vines, a 100-year-old



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Flanked by boxwood,  
the stairs that descend  
into the garden area are  
removable to access  
additional storage  
beneath the deck.





Where he once stored lumber, Lyle built a work shed with fir framing and trim. It was clad using three tiers of reed topped by insulated polycarbonate windows.





## Salad Bar in a Box

For Kara Lashley, raised beds were the only way to go. After sifting all sorts of pottery shards and glass pieces from the backyard, she was adamant that the vegetable garden should plunge its roots into carefully selected, amended soil. And the easiest approach was to build from the ground up. Kara and her husband, architect Lyle Bradley, got up to gardening speed by experimenting with a 3-foot-square raised bed made of construction debris before committing to the real deal. With Kara's stamp of approval, Lyle whipped out his architectural mojo, figured in the sun's movement, and planned the five 4x4-foot beds accordingly. He constructed the 10½-inch-tall raised beds of 4x4 Douglas fir. Staggering the beds so some are close to the wood walkway and others stand back maximizes the space, keeps crops from tangling, allows easy access for harvesting, and prevents larger crops from shading their neighbors. To minimize weeding, the couple planted woolly thyme and sedum between stepping-stones that intersect the boardwalk. To protect the lumber and extend the life of the raised beds, Lyle lined them with permeable landscape fabric. Kara filled the boxes with potting soil amended with seaweed, kelp, and compost. Crops are rotated and the configuration changes annually, but the family has a checklist of favorites that will always be part of the picture.

Lettuce, eggplants, summer squash, beets, tomatoes, peppers, Swiss chard, celery, basil, and kale are invariably sown. Rather than attempting to wedge cucumbers and pole beans into the busy raised beds, those climbing crops are planted along the fence outside the box. This might be Boston's smallest stab at agriculture, but it keeps a young family rolling in the greens throughout the growing season.





▶ Standing on a soft bed of sedum and thyme, Lily receives her first lesson in harvest timing from her patient mother.





cherry tree bearing bushels of fruit, and apricots and peaches. Plus tomatoes and basil were being harvested in a community garden. With a 15x60-foot space at his beck and call, Lyle saw the potential to take a nutritious turn. But first he needed to get his construction debris out of the way.

The lumber pile turned into a storage building/work space where the stockpiles once sat. The space is more accessible, the structure serves as a privacy screen for the yard, and it supports a green roof designed with egg-crate-style matting that keeps the soil membrane off the roof's surface. For siding, Kara found bamboo screening at a big-box store—similar to the bamboo used for their privacy fence. Lyle installed plexiglass panels to maximize light in his work space. Long, slender, and just wide enough for workbenches and storage, the shed is chic in a rustic way. And it left plenty of room for a garden.

Although a sunny yard was on his wish list, Lyle didn't have a specific garden plan. For pathways beyond the main boardwalk—constructed of 5/4x6 pressure-treated lumber laid into an existing sunken concrete walkway—the resourceful couple turned to Craigslist, where a contractor was unloading oddball pieces of bluestone, free for the taking. They wove it in with the natural stone found on the property, “laying it out like a puzzle.” To accommodate Kara's request for raised beds, the architect-in-residence staggered the boxes to maximize light intake for her

crops. Constructed of 4x4 Douglas fir, each bed is lined with permeable landscape fabric to keep the soil away from the wood. With mitered seams and careful craftsmanship, “I figure it will last at least 10 years,” Lyle says.

The raised beds are aimed at vegetables—eggplants, summer squash, Swiss chard, kale, parsley, and tomatoes—with a few scenic detours into companion snapdragons, marigolds, and zinnias. Elegantly and efficiently, they can produce the ingredients for many meals. But growing isn't limited to the raised beds. Along the edge of a new fence (fitted with wooden brackets to help pole beans get a leg up), shallow borders are brimming with herbs, perennials, and annuals. The entire smorgasbord can be surveyed from the deck that was in place when they moved in. And the deck is infinitely more comfy given the built-in benches that Lyle installed and the dining table waiting to receive what comes off the grill.

So business as usual for this backyard is salads, sandwiches, and beans on the side. Plus, all around the deck, lilies are planted—a gift from Kara's mother to celebrate the arrival of the family's gardener-in-training, Lily, now 2 years old. Lily has already learned how to harvest—sort of. Someday, she'll get the hang of waiting until the vegetables ripen. ●

**For more information, see Resources on page 124.**

**Above left:** Lyle sliced 6-foot-tall reed fencing in half to panel the lower half of his work shed, reinforcing it with fir trim.

**Above middle:** A large stone eases the grade change from the bluestone grilling area to the wooden boardwalk.

**Above right:** A curved wooden branch serves as a rustic door handle on the work shed door.