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## A recipe for retreat: Gardens for restoration

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1 of 3 | At a home near Alki Beach, landscape designer Leah Wiest used inspiration from a couple's travels to Southeast Asia to tell a visual story. (Courtesy of Sean Baxter via Classic Landscape + Nursery)

By [Erica Browne Grivas](#)

*Special to At Home in the Northwest*

Gardens do so much for us. From food and cooling summer shade to horticultural therapy and forest bathing, science is confirming what gardeners have long known: gardens help us ground, heal and restore.

In recent years, designers have seen a surge of people sculpting their outdoor spaces into havens for restoration.

“The change I’m seeing is that people are recognizing that their outdoor space really can be that ‘third place,’” says Dana Niblack of [Cascadia Landscape Design](#).

Courtney Olander of [Olander Garden Design](#) says, “I like to create what I call ‘secret spots’ for clients. These aren’t meant to be big gathering spaces. They are meant to be intimate, hidden and for one to two people. Quiet spaces where you can sneak away.”

Sometimes we focus first on creating entertainment or display gardens. Or, we spend so much time working on our garden that we forget to enjoy it.



The garden at this Matthews Beach home was designed by Sarah Van Sanden to foster wellness and warm conversation by the fire. (Erica Browne Grivas / Special to At Home in the Northwest)

Here are some expert strategies for enjoying a little downtime in the garden.

## Make your wish list

What does retreat mean to you? Napping in the sunshine on a hammock, a space for yoga or sauna with or without friends, a path to walk or simply a chair with a restful view?

For Kryssie Maybay of [Kismet Design](#), privacy and comfort are primary elements, while small features, like bubbling urns and walking paths, can add to the sense of “aaaah” we crave.

“The feeling of privacy and protection is the basis for relaxing,” Maybay says. Privacy can be enhanced with plants or structures like trellises and gates.

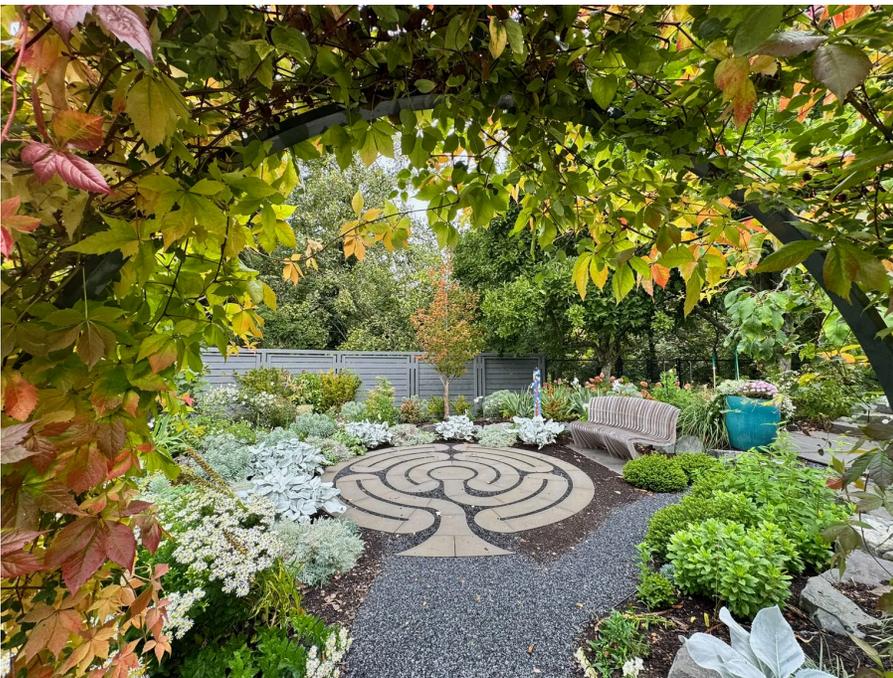
“Next is comfort. Having a comfortable place to pause, be it a hammock, a cushion on a bench or a chair with an ottoman to put your feet up,” she says. If space allows, she’ll add a walking path distinct from the house.



At the 2025 Northwest Flower and Garden Festival, Kryssie Maybay's display focused on three key elements: enclosure, water... (Erica Browne Grivas / Special to At Home in the Northwest)  
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## Retreats of all kinds

At Niblack's Shoreline home, her priority was to create a respite viewable from her office. She settled on a labyrinth. Now, she sees a vine-covered arch opening with a sinuous wooden bench beckoning at the rear. Niblack fell in love with labyrinths on annual retreats at Red Mountain Resort in Utah. She ordered her template from the [Labyrinth Company](#) and constructed it from bluestone.



Dana Niblack's dreamy garden in Shoreline features a labyrinth, a colorful variety of plantings and an arch of woody vines. (Courtesy of Cascadia Landscape Design)

At 11 feet wide, she says, "The turns are a little tight, but the flip side is you have to be slow and deliberate. Also, whether I walk it or not, I love looking at it."

Once you've defined your goals, think about the mood you wish to create: restful and calm, joyous and energizing?

A little bit of mystery helps, too.

“In my garden, the arch invites you into the space,” says Niblack. “You’re stepping through that gate from some other experience into a space that’s dedicated to your sense of peace.”

Plants set the mood with a soothing palette of silver and white with a framework of Senecio ‘Angel Wings,’ Euonymus ‘Paloma,’ and Euphorbia ‘Silver Swan.’ In spring, white-flowering crocus, daffodils and grape hyacinth erupt — she estimates she planted about 3000.



Daffodils bloom in Dana Niblack's garden. (Courtesy of Dana Niblack)

“Everything in that garden room is silver, white or green,” she says. “You’re really relying on texture, so the plants are really restful within that consistent theme.”

Leah Wiest of [Leah Designs](#) made a retreat space for a couple near Alki Beach. The enclosed front courtyard, installed by [Classic Landscape + Nursery](#), takes inspiration from sculptures seen in their travels to Southeast Asia.

“Key elements include a restrained material palette, layered planting to create enclosure, and softness and a circulation path that slows movement and encourages presence,” says Wiest.

A rain garden is fed by rain chains from the roof. Hanging bells ring gently in the wind. Framed views and a calm green palette reinforce an inward-facing focus. A smaller table welcomes a friend to chat, signaling a quiet restorative space.

“It’s really like being in a temple, you hear the music of the bells and the water,” says one homeowner.

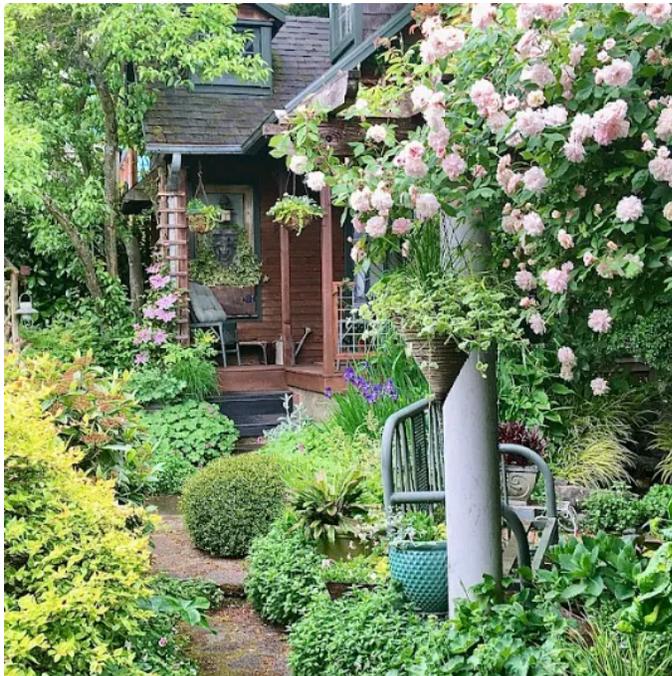


This West Seattle garden features calming water elements and bell chimes. (Courtesy of Sean Baxter via Classic... [More](#) ✓)

Your definition of retreat can shift over time, too. For young parents, giving their kids a safe play area can be the most relaxing thing. As time passes, they may want more personal spaces. People in their 50s and 60s, says Niblack, will ask for a place to have breakfast in the morning or wine in the evening.

Sharva and David Maynard’s Ballard garden, “Westaways,” is a labor of love that restores on many levels.

“There’s a little terrace I designed around a love seat David welded from an old 30s bed frame and a couple of old 1930s garden chairs,” Maynard says. “We sit there and listen to the water bubbling and watch the birds bathe in the pond, and it’s just heaven. We keep finding that if nature can’t restore our peace and serenity, nothing can.”



 1 of 2 | “Down this garden path lies solace and peace,” says Sharva Maynard. “Herbs and clematis, Cecile Brunner rose and abelia light the way.” (Courtesy of Sharva Maynard)

Hot tubs, saunas and cold plunges are popular wellness accessories. Maybay’s clients are increasingly requesting hot tubs and saunas for that instant relaxation.

In Beacon Hill, Jennifer Harris created a contemplative and wellness garden.

When she bought the home, it was planted with rare pines and had a walking path surrounding a central mound. Having lived in Japan for 4 years, she embraced the Japanese aesthetic with a Japanese-style onsen, a sauna and spa surrounded by a Japanese maple and a huge “megalith.”

“[It’s] like sitting in a little forest,” she says. “I’ve planted it with many spring bulbs, so at that time of year, it’s a nice place to sit and watch spring unfold, shady and cool in the summer.”

Niblack uses her deck hot tub almost daily to melt away the digging and hauling from the day's efforts.

We asked some local gardeners to share their home garden retreats. From “dreaming sheds” to a recycled tire meditation seat, retreat comes in myriad forms.

Outside Woodinville, Nicole Monohan says, “I have an art studio in the woods with a path that meanders through the native ferns and trees ... where I teach meditative art that feeds our well-being.”

Ross Bayton, director of Indianola's Heronswood Garden, created a reading nook at home consisting of “a small deck with a hedge around it.”

Leslie Ertle Anderson notes, “Enough cannot be said for an old bistro table in the shade and a nice gin and tonic with a good book!”

Many people simply posted a picture of a favorite spot in their garden because retreat is at the heart of every garden.

## **Mini retreats**

Whether you are a gardener who needs a reminder to enjoy your space or just want to connect with the outdoors, it's easy to find a spot for a getaway.

“You could make a quite restful, peaceful place with a 6-by-6 area,” Niblack says. It can be as small as a chair, bench or a swing.

A raised deck is a great opportunity to hang a bench in the space underneath, too. For a yoga or meditation space, she recommends creating a platform to protect from wet ground and a roof to help you use it all year.

Comfort is a nonnegotiable.

“If there's one thing I'd say to splurge on,” Niblack suggests, “it's the seat you actually want to stay seated in.”

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