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Garden railway runs through family's joined yards

BY ANNIE CALOVICH
The Wichita Eagle

The Dawleys of Wichita are a fortunate family. Mom and Dad have lived in the same house at 2015 E. Blake since 1968, and their son moved into the house next door several years ago, followed by their daughter and her husband in the house next to his a couple of years ago.

All three backyards off Pawnee and Southeast Boulevard form one unbroken territory, with four dachshunds — belonging to daughter Lindalee Defrees — running in between them at will.

The family has a fondness for model trains, and a garden railway that started in Mom and Dad's — er, Larry and Marylou Dawley's — yard eventually will choo-choo all the way down to Lindalee's.

For now, though, you can see the beginnings of this trifecta in Larry and Marylou's backyard when the Wichita Area Garden Railroad Society has its annual tour next weekend. Admission is free, and the trains in seven yards will run from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sept. 17, rain or shine.

Right before I heard about the Dawleys' set-up, I read about the owners of three row houses in Washington, D.C., who had combined their small yards into a single garden.

"The spaces retain their own identity but are connected by two gates and a network of paths," Adrian Higgins wrote in the Post. "The neighbors feel at ease in one another's landscape and, moreover, revel in the psychological linkage of the spaces."

It reminded me of some gardener-neighbors in Derby who had joined landscapes and been on a garden tour together. The yards were different but gave such a sense of space when taken together.

"Shared spaces need neighbors who get along, stay put and aren't territorial," Higgins wrote. "If you need to draw up a contract to make the arrangement work, it's probably not for you."

The Dawleys, of course, don't need a contract, and I love their feeling of close-by family. To the other side of Larry and Marylou, a granddaughter lives two doors down.

Larry and Marylou went on their first garden railway tour four years ago and started to build their own railway three years ago. Son Joe then put down his own tracks, but, for the show, he has moved his layout into his folks' yard. Larry and Marylou have encouraged their son-in-law, Jake, to get his own trains going with gift certificates to Garden Railway Gizmos hobby shop at 1425 N. Broadway. (It's also one of the stops on the tour.)

"Now mature and with most of the construction elements done, the gardens have become a place for relaxation and tinkering," Higgins wrote of the D.C. yards. "The sunny northernmost garden functions as the communal tomato patch, the abundant fruit of the central kiwi vine will end up in everyone's kitchen, and the pets are free range."

As three of the dachshunds barked from Lindalee's backyard, one of them, Lucky Boy, stuck close to Larry and Marylou. Turns out he spends his time at their house until it's time for bed. Then he heads home.

"The shared arrangement comes into its own during parties," Higgins wrote in the Post. "Guests can find a quiet corner to talk or smoke. During one surprise party, they assembled in one garden before entering another."

"For these neighbors, the sense of togetherness was reinforced by their common need to fix up their houses."

The Dawleys are scrambling to get ready for the tour, and it'll be fun to see what future years bring across all three yards on future garden railroad tours.

You may know the garden railroad society from its model train displays at Botanica during the holiday Illuminations event. The group says it is working with Botanica on a permanent display that would be year-round.

In addition to Gizmos and the Dawley stops on the tour, other locations are 2434 N. Amidon, 6356 N. Seneca, 217 Joann, 844 N. Westlink and 200 SW 2nd in Newton.

You can get guides to the tour at many garden centers and hobby shops and at Botanica. Although the tour is free, there will be a place to drop donations to help defray the cost of printing the tour guide and for the club's community outreach programs.

Reach Annie Calovich at 316-268-6596 or acalovich@wichitaeagle.com. **If you go** wichita area garden railroad tour What: Tour of model garden railroads in Wichita and Newton Where: 1425 N. Broadway, 2434 N. Amidon, 6356 N. Seneca, 217 Joann, 844 N. Westlink and 2015 E. Blake in Wichita and 200 SW 2nd in Newton When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sept. 17 How much: Free For more information, pick up a free tour guide at many garden centers and hobby shops and at Botanica.

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