



The backyard on this property had building restrictions, so Grace took a flexible approach and created a private "backyard" in the spacious front yard. The 60-year-old *Dracaena draco* (dragon tree) is a key focal point (shown in top-left corner) that drove the plant selection on the property.

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MARGIE GRACE  
**CONNECTS DESIGN**  
TO ECOSYSTEMS AND THE COMMUNITY

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With a background in earth science, designer Margie Grace takes a broader view in her approach to designing a landscape. "The living land is different from built objects; it works in systems and in cycles," she says. "It takes big-picture thinking, but I believe over time we're going to see more components of the native biome brought into landscape design." While her landscapes are personalized to the owners, they also integrate nature and provide satisfying ways of interacting with the broader human community.

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**COMPANY:** GRACE DESIGN ASSOCIATES, INC.  
**PROJECT LOCATION:** SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA  
**PHOTOGRAPHY BY:** HOLLY LEPERE

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**Right:** The owners wanted a seating nook where they could sunbathe, overlook the ocean, and dip their toes in the sand. **Below:** To avoid irrigating the land on this ocean bluff, Grace added a bocce court, which is used almost daily by the owners.



In this project, on the skinny strip of land facing the ocean bluff, the need to prevent erosion spurred design decisions. Water percolating through the soil, burrowing animals on the bluff, and rainwater sloughing off the top layer of soil all contribute to erosion, so Grace's first step was to make sure the landscaping did not compound the runoff load. "The bocce court added a lot of non-irrigated area, and the sandy seating nook provided a place for the owners to sunbathe," says Grace. Then, to enable hawks and other raptors to keep the rodent population in balance, she left fallen trees on the cliff side to act as perching spots, so the predatory birds were able to hunt. Lastly, she used deep-rooted native plants to knit the soil together. Out of these solutions, a certain aesthetic arose which gave an automatic sense of place.

A notable aspect to her approach is the flexible use of space. In this landscape, the "backyard" is actually in the front yard. Grace was faced with the challenge of creating a semi-private space in front because the area at the back had restrictions on what could be built. The frosted-glass wall allows private swimming, yet its translucency presents a friendlier face to the neighbors than a traditional 6-foot-tall fence. On the street side, vegetables are planted behind a rustic grape-stake fence. "It's a social draw," she says. "You're not barricaded in or out, so you can enjoy a shared experience gardening as part of the community." This idea of shared experiences is an important element in sustainability, and it meets a basic human need for social interaction.

"We've been thinking about the environment as a place that's 'out there,'" she says. But we're interconnected and can recognize and honor that fact through good design. "Ground birds need a connected habitat to thrive, so you can do a lot of good by knocking out a few fence boards between you and your neighbors," she says. "Or leave a pile of wet wood in the corner for salamanders." Small steps go a long way towards rebuilding our relationship with nature. "If we lose touch with our sense of wonder, a little piece of us is no longer available—that piece isn't frivolous." 



Colorful furnishings and the sound of water invite visitors outside to relax. The contemporary ceramic stools can be pushed together to make a bench or can double as a coffee table.

## CREATING A SHARED COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE

*To save resources, "we don't have to change our style of living at all, if we are just a tiny bit smarter in how we design," says Grace. Consider sharing lesser-used elements with neighbors for a boost to both environment and pocketbook.*

- DRIVEWAYS**  
If you are designing your home from the start, think about building a shared driveway that leads to your own private garage.
- BASKETBALL HOOPS**  
One basketball hoop for every three to four homes is more than enough.
- LAWN EQUIPMENT**  
A shed on the property line could house lawn equipment for two neighbors.
- BARBECUES**  
Who doesn't like a neighborhood cookout? Consider a block party instead of barbecuing alone.
- CHICKENS**  
Even "urban chickens" can be shared, with several neighbors contributing land and chores, and enjoying the resulting eggs.

The frosted glass wall presents a friendly face to the neighbors, and vegetable beds behind the fence encourage conversation.

