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This page: The graceful curves of an arbor create a welcoming doorway to Margie Grace's garden. Opposite, left-right: This artichoke plant is just one of many edibles Grace grows at home. The relaxing sounds of the fountain create a serene space to relax and enjoy a book.

The Gardeners' Garden

Peek into the private gardens of four local landscape experts.

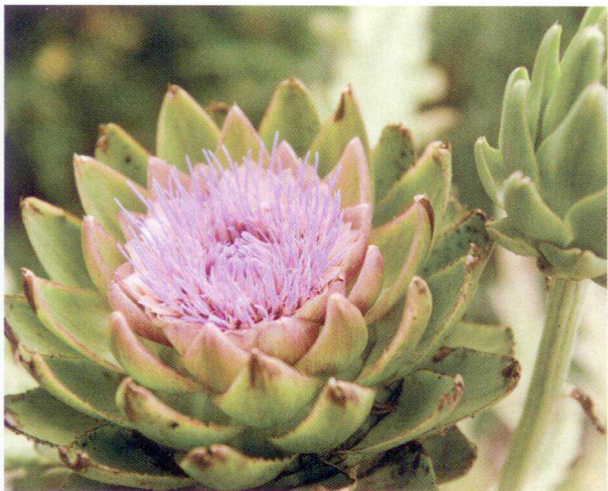
BY K. REKA BADGER • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIA MEHLER

UNLIKE THE PROVERBIAL shoeless cobbler and hungry cook, the landscape professionals of Santa Barbara happily put their creative skills to personal use. They build gardens for their own pleasure, and whether cultivating tidy perennial beds or stuffing plants into every available space, they invariably create wonderlands of floral beauty.

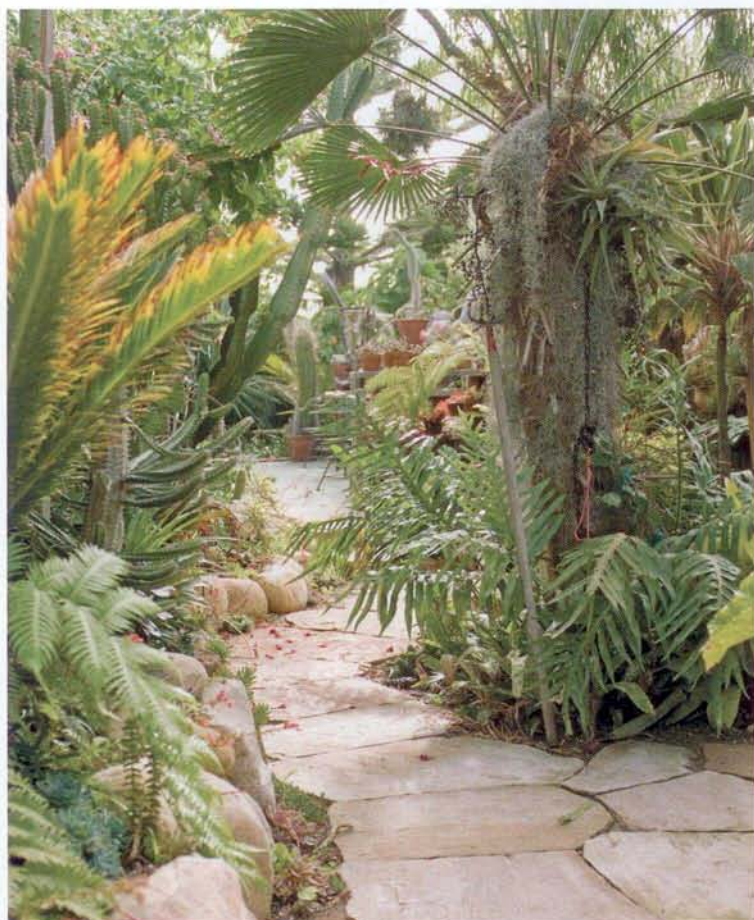
"Spending time in my garden grounds me," says **Margie Grace**, owner of Grace Design Associates. "I use it to center myself," she explains. "Building other people's gardens is a painterly exercise. I collect the materials and that's my palette, but it's different from tending a garden, watching it change through time. I like doing both, but the nurturing part happens at home."

Wearied of working with the difficult adobe-type soil in her suburban yard, Grace adopted a system of pots that hold a combination of edibles and ornamentals. For the best sunlight and easy access to produce, she grows the majority of her vegetables in the front yard, along the driveway and right up to the curb.

"I'm finding creative ways to stack and double stack," she says. "I've got a flower garden with veggie pots in it. I have a theory that if I'm working on something, it should either bring me great joy or feed me."

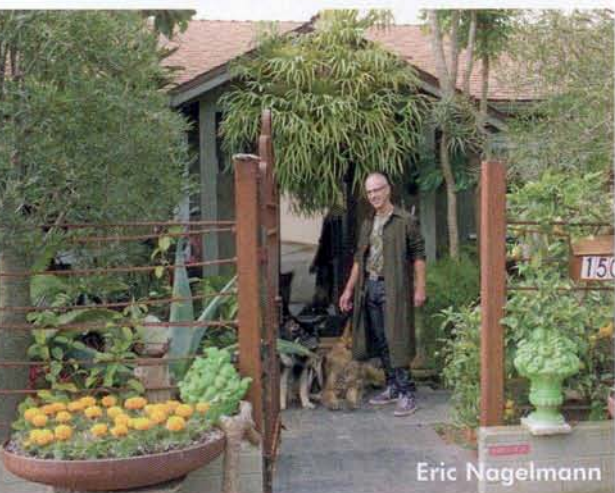


Margie Grace



"I love the crazy stuff," Nagelmann says. "My garden is not practical at all. I use weird textures, colors and odd juxtapositions of things. For example, I have orchids right next to cactus! I don't go into my garden to relax. I go into my garden to be stimulated."

Local plantsmen agree that their home gardens tend to be smaller than many of those they design for clients. Planting schemes differ, too, in scope, composition and sometimes even sheer complexity. A plant fanatic since childhood, landscape designer **Eric Nagelmann** once lived and worked at Casa del Herrero and, in 2002, designed the elegant cactus garden at Lotusland. Nagelmann reveals that his garden, built on a Mesa-area hillside, allows him to express an underlying rebellious streak.



Top: Eric Nagelmann's lush garden reflects a rebellious streak. Above: Nagelmann welcomes visitors to his Mesa area home.

"I love breaking rules," Nagelmann laughs, "for my garden, not for a client's garden. I would never, ever recommend my garden to a client, because as small as it is, it's very complicated."

Winding paths link the front, back and side yards, which are set at varying elevations. Stone borders barely contain a riot of ferns, succulents, cacti and columnar euphorbia resembling clusters of so many organ pipes.

Spanish moss tumbles from the crown of a palm tree, coral flower spikes rise from clumps of aloe and epiphytic cacti dangle overhead. Under Nagelmann's direction, a plank fitted with staghorn ferns becomes a living totem pole.

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Landscape professionals often view their gardens as a kind of living laboratory, where they can dabble with plants and outdoor art. Consequently, change plays a key role in the ongoing look of a practicing plantsman's yard.

"The one safe place I think a garden designer can experiment is in their own garden," says **Katie O'Reilly Rogers**, a landscape architect who has run her own eponymous firm since 1992. "A lot of it is



Katie O'Reilly Rogers



Clockwise from top: Both chickens and guest Mary Ellen Tiffany (at left) feel right at home in Katie O'Reilly Rogers' backyard. Rogers prunes her colorful roses. This fireplace is another great entertaining spot. Laurel Margerum joins Rogers for a glass of wine and enjoys the ambiance.



Sydney Baumgartner



Clockwise from above: The formal entrance to Sydney Baumgartner's gardens. Baumgartner's cat has an array of "garden rooms" to lounge in. Delicious apples bloom. Poppies like this *Papaver Somnifera* 'Lauren's Grape' share space with edibles.

designing, painting with plants and then watching to see what happens.”

O’Reilly bought her house near the mission in 2002 and transformed what she describes as “sort of a junkyard” into a series of outdoor rooms graced with flowers year-round. She designed an elevated deck with an outdoor fireplace, a small lawn and a perennial border full of roses, coneflowers and other blooming beauties.

“I like a garden that looks green, lush and colorful,” she admits. “I know this is non-pc, but I love lawns, and mine is just the right size. You can mow it with a hand mower, and my family likes to kick a soccer ball or play croquet on it.

“I had a nice compliment from an interior designer,” she continues, “who said my garden looks like it belongs to someone who loves to garden. I think that’s about the nicest thing anyone could say.”

Sydney Baumgartner has owned a highly successful landscape architecture firm since 1983 and is another local plant maven who loves to experiment in her garden.

“I usually figure out ideas in my own garden and make sure they work,” Baumgartner explains. “I play with foliage and plant combinations, texture and form. I experiment with plants and make sure they’re reliable before I recommend them to clients.”

She credits Elizabeth de Forest, who received her landscape architecture license in 1952 and was wed to renowned landscape architect Lockwood de Forest, as her mentor. When Baumgartner married into the family, Mrs. de Forest became her aunt, as well as a tireless champion of her budding career.

Baumgartner purchased her home near downtown Santa Barbara in 1980 and has worked wonders on what once sported little more than a blanket of white rock and a few scraggly junipers. The property measures about two-thirds of an acre, but seems larger, Baumgartner explains, because each garden room reveals itself in turn upon exploration of the grounds.

“There are so many places to go in my garden that you can’t get bored,” she says. “It’s really a lot of fun, and it changes all year long. I have a lawn where we play bocce and a flower-arranging garden with gravel and stooled shrubs that are...pruned into rounded shapes of different sizes. It’s quite amazing!

“I do a lot of the pruning myself,” she adds, “because I love doing it. It’s my rest from my design work.”

Throughout the yard, Baumgartner has planted tall cypress to separate the various “rooms” and installed an outdoor shower inspired by a trip to Bali. Her favorite area is the chandelier garden, where a fountain burbles and crystals hanging among tree branches sparkle in the sunlight.

Santa Barbara’s landscape professionals cite diverse reasons for creating their own gardens—from rebellion to a drive to prune to a simple desire for fresh veggies or a serene space to entertain. Like all avid gardeners, they treasure plants, the art of puttering in the yard and the pure pleasure of spending time amid an oasis of floral beauty. ✨

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