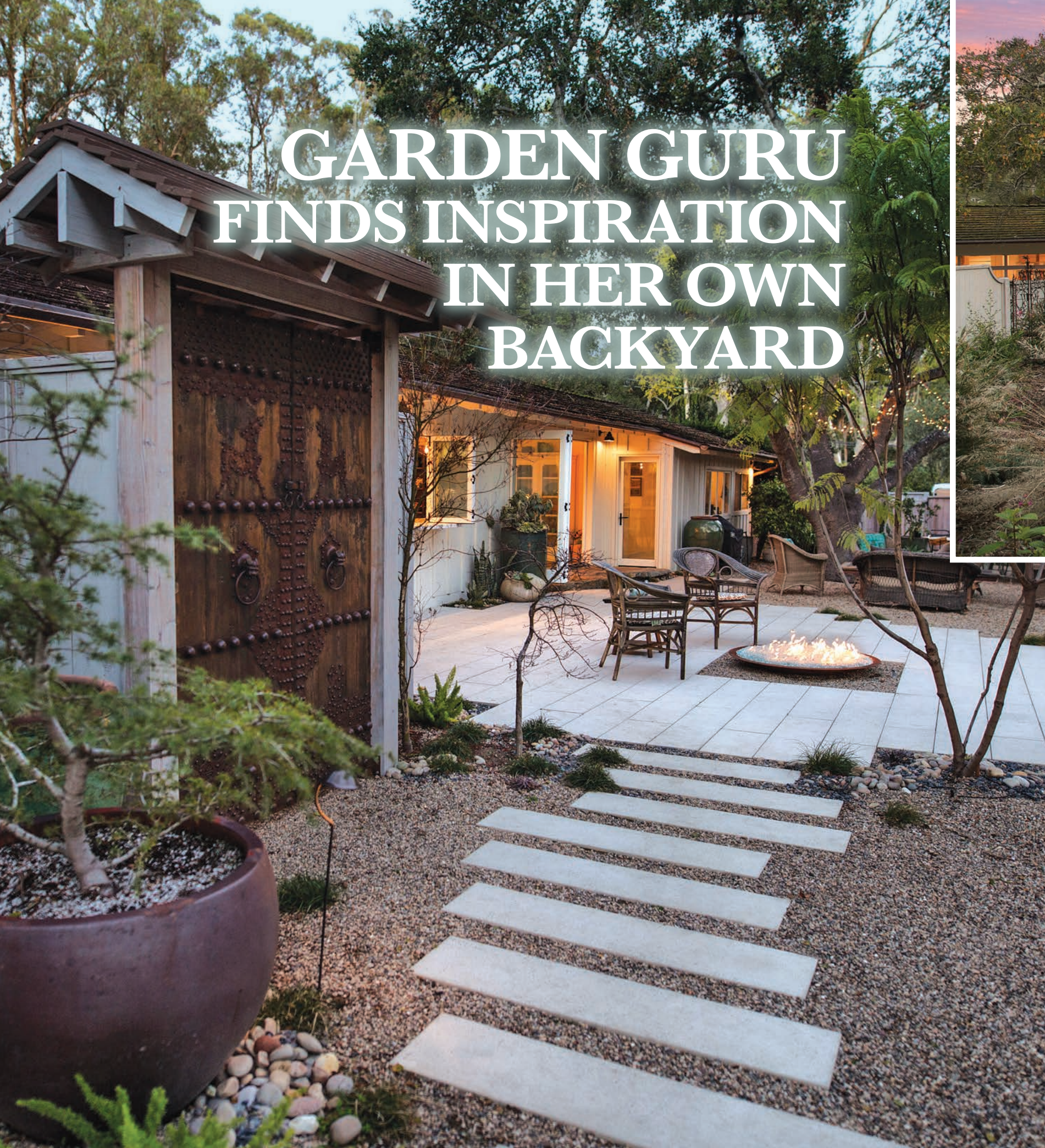


GARDEN GURU FINDS INSPIRATION IN HER OWN BACKYARD



GOOD NEIGHBOR: the welcoming front garden was created out of the former concrete driveway.

When Margie Grace, principal at landscape design-build firm Grace Design Associates, embarks on a new project, she makes a point of getting to know her clients—how they live, what they value—in order to establish a shared vision and creative alignment. In the case of a recent home and garden remodel, that wasn't hard. She was the client.

BY **NANCY RANSOHOFF**
PHOTOS BY
JIM BARTSCH

Nestled among majestic mature trees

on Sycamore Canyon Road, the home is owned by Grace and Dawn Close, who is also a principal at Grace Design Associates. They took the mid-1950s California ranch-style house down to the studs, updating it with all new systems and design details that exude a rustic elegance. The home, set on an approximately one-acre lot, is designed to embrace its transformed outdoor spaces, with large bi-fold windows and doors opening to a park-like setting complete with outdoor “rooms” and hidden gardens.

Good Neighbor

The front garden faces a view of tall Chilean wine palms that flank the perimeter of Lotusland. “It’s incredibly cool to drive out the driveway and see the

pink wall of Lotusland,” says Grace, who took some of her inspiration from the renowned botanical gardens across the street.

To add life and texture to the formerly asphalt-laden front yard, Grace used three-level terracing: gravel in a mix of greys and golds to complement a historic native sandstone wall that edges the property; plants, including Chitalpa, which is pink-hued at different times of year; and a shaggy curtain of *Acacia cognata*. A gurgling fountain is surrounded by the grey-green softness of *Dymondia margaretae* (Silver Carpet). Also delighting the eye are dramatic potted plants and a couple of cement garden gnomes, reproductions of antique stone grotesques in Lotusland’s Theater Garden. Grace relishes the transformation process. “I love the blight to beauty thing,” she says.

Whimsy and Water

Grace also loves a bit of whimsy. Her adjacent Purple Rain Garden is an admiring and playful nod to Prince. “It’s just light-hearted and fun,” she says, pointing out three large aubergine-colored Gracie Modern steel arbor hoops festooned with strings of tiny mirrors that send spots of light dancing around the garden. Concentric bands of *Agapanthus* and *Agave attenuata* sweep around the perimeter. Ever mindful of her setting, Grace uses low-water-demand plantings throughout. “I’m always going to do smart maintenance, smart water and smart fire,” she notes. “We did the project in dribs and drabs. I would do a garden and run to the water meter and see. Then do another section.”

Outside In

Stepping from the Sydney Peak flagstone front step into the four-bedroom house, the same natural, serene aesthetic continues. Wide-plank engineered wood floors in “French oak” create continuity throughout, with marble floors in the bathrooms. Design details, such as shaker doors, crown moldings and a white palette, contribute to the crisp, clean, updated look. “We’re calling it Napa/Sonoma,” says Grace. “When I was a little kid, I used to work on my fort,” she says. “I’m still working on my fort.”

Bringing the outside in was a top priority, and

purposeful design features make it seamless. Large accordion doors, most often open to fresh breezes, replaced sliders in the dining room. Above the kitchen sink, eight-foot bi-fold windows over a Calcutta marble countertop pass through to an inviting park-like backyard.

Out Back

Here, Grace created distinct gardens while retaining mature trees that include a dozen show-stopping live oaks, a large she-oak and some relic pines. A flat lawn was replaced by drifts of perennial grasses. Sweeping outdoor spaces include areas for dining, lounging and barbecuing, along with a fire pit patio. Sycamores laced with twinkle lights form a living arbor over a massive stone table in the dining pergola. Adding to the park-like feeling is a man-made pond edged with local sandstone. “We wanted to attract as many native components of the biome as we could,” Grace says. “It’s a big bird attractor.”

Continuing the Lotusland narrative, a walled Asian-themed secret garden sits behind a set of massive antique Chinese doors—inside is a granite fountain, Japanese maples, a serpentine-form weeping birch and a clump of *Chusquea coronalis*. “There was definitely a little Asian thing going on at Lotusland,” says Grace.

“We want the gardens to be an invitation to wander, to linger,” says Grace. “People are better when they can be around nature. They need it to recharge their batteries.”



WHIMSY AND WATER: the Purple Rain Garden in the front yard is a happy, light-hearted nod to Prince.

OUT BACK: retaining these beautiful live oaks was a critical element in the backyard design.

OUTSIDE IN: multiple seating areas and the large accordion doors make this an ideal space for entertaining or relaxing.

