

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat, a white long-sleeved top, a white ruffled skirt, and a dark brown belt, is walking towards the camera on a path made of wooden planks. The path is surrounded by lush greenery, including tall grasses and various plants. The background shows trees and a bright sky, suggesting a sunny day in a garden.

DESIGNER  
PENNY BIANCHI'S  
GARDEN HELPS HER  
LIVE HER DREAM.

# providence *on the* pacific

BY ETHNE CLARKE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDMUND BARR  
PRODUCED BY ANDREA CAUGHEY





The loggia, curtained by ivy and sweet-scented flowers and herbs, is one of Penny Bianchi's favorite retreats in a garden designed for relaxation and entertaining. Opposite: Penny strolling through the wild garden.





Gravel-and-stepping-stone paths lead through the garden, with turning points marked by urns or sculptures. **Opposite, far left:** The gravel terrace between the house and the wild garden recalls a sunny Provençal landscape. **Left:** Ivy colonizes the interior of the loggia room.



## AS THAT LEGENDARY HOLLYWOOD PRODUCER AND LANGUAGE MANGLER

Sam Goldwyn was fond of saying: "In two words: Im. Possible!" And these four syllables (sorry, Sam) are ones that Penny and Adam Bianchi got used to hearing—and ignoring—as they mapped out their plan to build a home and garden on a parcel of land in Montecito, California. For this was no ordinary piece of la-la land real estate. Although attractively positioned between a nature preserve and an old, 50-plus-acre estate, the Bianchis' modest two acres had long been considered unbuildable because the ground was subject to flooding.

But this is Southern California, dream capital of the world—and Penny Bianchi, as a sought-after interior designer, is in the business of making other people's dreams happen. So, when it came to realizing her own personal vision, a little dampness wasn't about to discourage her. "The first thing I did—even before we started the house—was dig a large pond," explains Penny. "People thought I was crazy, but it immediately filled with water, and because the subsoil was heavy clay, it stayed full." This was just one of the many pleasant surprises she got along the way. Soon after the water feature was established, a longtime resident of the area paid a call to say how happy she was to see it had been restored. Recalls Penny, "I had no idea there had been a pond there in the first place!"

The guiding principle of the Bianchis' building project was to sit lightly on the land. All around them, veritable palaces were replacing the small cottages that once upon a time were characteristic dwellings in this bucolic area tucked between the urban hubs of Los Angeles and Santa Barbara. "Since it was the natural, unspoiled nature of the land that attracted us in the first place, we decided to make every effort to conserve it," says Penny, describing how they arrived at the final scheme to build a residential compound of three small units instead of erecting one vast structure. "The main house, the guesthouse, and a garage arranged around a courtyard present a much lower profile and



### “our designer says”

Even the smallest garden can be made earth-friendly using basic tips from garden designer Margie Grace and Penny Bianchi:

- Suit the plant to the site: Put plants where they will be happy, not where you'll struggle to keep them alive.
- Let native plants and grasses predominate but supplement with adapted exotics to punch up the planting scheme.
- Let plants create their own mulch by planting densely and in layers to discourage weed infestations and water loss.
- Chip, shred, and reuse garden refuse as mulch.
- Choose loose gravel or other "soft," porous surfaces for pathways and drives to reduce water runoff.
- Position nesting boxes and water pockets around the garden, and leave brushwood piles in out-of-the-way corners. Don't be in a hurry to clear seed-producing plants.





**Right:** An outdoor dining area created on the faux dry riverbed. **Far right:** The pond with duck house. **Center:** In this photo from 2001, the house is on the left, the garage to the right, and the guesthouse is at the rear, next to the garden entrance. **Bottom right:** Today the main house is cloaked in ivy with Empire-period French sphinxes framing the entrance.



But in spite of this major alteration to the site, in other areas pains were taken to keep disturbance to a minimum, because this is as much a wildlife refuge as it is a charming, livable garden. "The garden is on the flight path for a number of migratory species," says Penny, outlining the specific needs her landscape had to meet. "Around the pond we have grassy areas for forage and brush piles that provide refuge for native quails."

As the garden areas evolved, Penny decided to call in a landscape designer to pull all the parts together, and so brought in Margie Grace, who takes pride in her reputation for creating the gardens her clients want. "I listen to their needs, their vision, and then help them to stay in touch with the reality of the site—and their ability to tend the garden—and go from there."

One of the first places they went was the faux dry-creek bed that now flows along the western side of the garden. It

serves two purposes—assisting the drainage on the site while the gravel "riverbed" provides a riparian, or riverbank, habitat in the garden where plants that tolerate wet conditions find a home. The soil excavated to create this feature—and make room for the river gravel and boulders—was used to create elevated planting beds around the garden. "The Bianchis had a vision," explains Margie. "They wanted their garden to fit seamlessly into the native landscape and be a wildlife sanctuary as well as a retreat for them from the workaday world."

Crunching along the gravel paths, admiring a great blue heron as it preens to perfection, or idling away an afternoon on a sunny bench, it's easy to be inspired by the couple's determination that nothing is "im. possible." ■

Landscape designer: Margie Grace

For more information, see sources on page 216.





Rosemary and lavender frame an antique iron bench beneath the shuttered windows of the guesthouse. The blue trim echoes the colors of traditional Provençal cottages.

so have less of a visual impact, which helps the buildings to fit more comfortably into the landscape. In all, we have about 3,500 square feet of living space. It's plenty." (Visit Penny's home in *Traditional Home*, July 2002.)

Certainly, from the street, the Bianchis' home looks more like a storybook Provençal village than a single-family dwelling. From the red-tile roofs to the blue-paint trim, chez Bianchi exudes French charm and the easy-living style of the Mediterranean, a theme carried through in the gardens, which are designed for picnic-style entertaining *sur l'herbe*.

One of the central outdoor living spaces is the south-facing loggia and gravel terrace directly off the living room of the house. "It's a large room with window-sized openings but no glass," is how Penny describes the loggia, which is comfortably furnished and ornamented with her eclectic choice of

bijoux figurines, hand-painted murals, and whimsical chandeliers that at dusk send shards of glittering light dancing across the garden. And its open sides capture cooling cross-breezes.

But it is the contrast between the highly decorative, formal nature of the loggia and the natural informality of the garden that creates a lively and captivating tension. "Like the house, the garden was designed in stages," says Penny, who rather than hire one landscaper, involved different designers and contractors in the process, depending on the job being tackled.

"We had one team to thin the eucalyptus so that native coast live oaks could flourish; another put in pathways around the property, and so on," explains Penny. The Bianchis had engineers install an intricate drainage system, augmented by a low wall around the perimeter of the property, to divert water flow should the drainage system be unable to cope.