

FINE LIVING IN THE GREATER PASADENA AREA

ARROYO

MONTHLY
MARCH 2010

**TAME YOUR RUGGED
PIECE OF PASADENA
AN EXPERT SHOWS YOU HOW**

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

**THE ARBORETUM'S
TOP 10 PLANTS
FOR YOUR GARDEN**

**A PASADENA DESIGNER'S
HIDDEN ESCAPE**

**A TASTE
SENSATION
THE FLAVORS
OF ARROYO**



NOTHING BUT NATURE

A SUPPOSEDLY UNUSABLE
PASADENA PLOT BECOMES
A HIDDEN RETREAT IN THE
HANDS OF A DESIGNER'S
DESIGNER.

BY B.J. LORENZO
PHOTOS BY DEIDRA WALPOLE

Bennett's patio is ringed by potted trailing white geraniums, bearded iris, snapdragons and Julia Child and hot cocoa roses.



WHEN CYNTHIA BENNETT FINALLY FOUND HER PIECE OF PASADENA HEAVEN AFTER A TWO-YEAR SEARCH, THE LAND SHE CHOSE WAS UNUSED AND CONSIDERED UNUSABLE. REALTORS CALLED IT “A FLAGPOLE LOT” BECAUSE IT WAS SHAPED LIKE ONE. THE “POLE” PORTION WAS A 250-FOOT DRIVE HIDDEN FROM THE STREET. AT THE TOP AND OFF TO ONE SIDE SAT AN ABANDONED STRETCH OF CRAGGY, OVERGROWN LAND SHAPED LIKE A FLAG.

Make the same trip up the long drive today and you’ll find the estate that Bennett and her husband, Ed De Beixedon, call home. It’s a cottage with Old World attitude nestled in what poetic types might call a woodland grotto. Or



imagine a mini-villa centered in a bed of exuberant blooms and greens, like an entrée presented by a five-star chef.

Simply charming, you might say, and leave it at that. But there was nothing simple about achieving such charm. The gardens and hardscape — with multi-

—CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

ple rock walls, terraces on many levels and meandering gravel paths — are essential to the home’s rustic appeal. It took ingenuity and knowledge of the Arroyo Seco’s ecology to put them in place and make them seem so serendipitously natural. And that was no simple matter: The sloping, rocky terrain, typical of the area, has challenged homeowners for more than a century.

Bennett heads Bennett & Associates, an interior design firm specializing in upscale remodeling. She is a blond wisp of a woman with a soft voice, radiant smile and contractor’s license. She designed and oversaw construction of the house, she says, and its simple architectural lines are an homage to the old barns and rural homes of Holland, where she lived for many years and where her children were born. The house was relatively easy to design and build, Bennett says, because she knew exactly what she wanted. But when it came to the gardens, she says, “I needed help.”

Bennett called on Margie Grace, a Santa Barbara–based landscape designer. Her firm, Grace Design Associates, won the 2009 International Landscape Designer of the Year award and the Gold Award for Residential Design from the Association of Professional Landscape Designers. She is president of the Green Building Alliance of Santa Barbara. And she is not one to mince words.

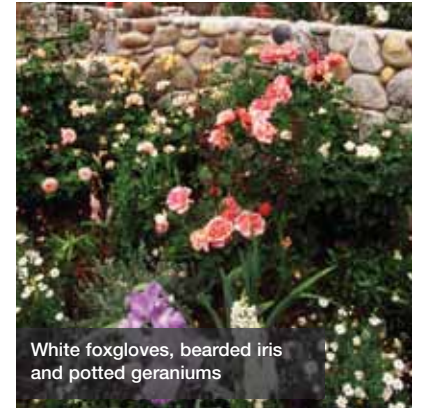
“There were multiple challenges on Cynthia Bennett’s project,” she says. “You’ve got the 12,500-square-foot lot at the end of a long narrow drive, shoe-horned between other people’s properties. So you have the screening challenge. Everyone needs screening from everyone else. You can’t just throw up 25 feet of bamboo, because you must be respectful of your neighbors’ view and sun exposure. Sun and view have no respect for lot lines.” The problem was solved with a variety of plantings that include luxuriant climbing roses and wisteria on the



Stepping stones create a path through the cutting garden.



View of the cutting garden from the lawn



White foxgloves, bearded iris and potted geraniums

arching trellises, two kinds of trumpet vines (blood red and royal) along the walls and dogwoods and camellias. The strategy was so successful that a recent visitor had no idea there are other residences anywhere near the Bennett property.

Then there are the massive old oak trees, which offer dappled shade where one might prefer sun. The oaks can’t be moved and, by law, must be kept healthy and protected. “Watering must be appropriate, and you can’t throw too much soil around them,” Grace says. “They’re used to a rainy season and then nine months of dryness. That limits your choice of planting. The patchy sunlight is ideal for azaleas and camellias.”



The author cutting iceberg roses in her garden

TIPS FOR TAMING YOUR PIECE OF PASADENA

BY MARGIE GRACE

Gardening in Pasadena can be challenging, with rock-filled decomposed granite soils, steep canyons, narrow arroyos, complex drainage issues, harsh sun, deep shade, occasional Santa Ana winds and the constant threat of drought and wildfire. But beautiful gardens can easily be had by following these fundamental design and maintenance guidelines tailored for the region:



A riot of color

And then there's the soil itself, typical of the Arroyo area. "It's all decomposed granite — really sandy, not much organic material in it. For that we use plants that want good drainage" such as such as lavenders, sages, catmint and yarrow.

And there's the rock challenge: masses of river rock and boulders, also native to the Arroyo. "What do we do with them? For centuries, people have removed native rocks from where they want to build and then used those rocks to build fences around the perimeter. Makes sense, doesn't it?"

But Grace says the "slope challenge" was the biggest. "Cynthia built her house on a flat pad. But all around that house was a drop of 12 to 15 feet. How do we step outside and not fall off the edge?"

Terraces and terracing were the answer. Some terraces on the same level as the interior floors of the two-story house offer outdoor rooms right outside the French doors. Others are just a step or two down — all intimate spaces enclosed

—CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

Use local materials

Granite boulders and cobbles are abundant throughout the area. Harvest them right from your land or import them from local quarries. These native stones tie your garden to the natural environment and surrounding mountain and valley views. Use them in foundations and garden walls or as landscape boulders, encircling ponds and dry creeks.

Plan ahead for a water supply

Pasadena receives slightly more annual rainfall than the average desert. Rain comes seasonally and the dry period lasts most of the year. Droughts are a certainty, so collecting rainwater makes good eco-sense. It also lightens the load on the city's infrastructure, keeps creeks clean and recharges the local aquifer. Install rainwater swales or a dry creek to collect and percolate water throughout your garden. Grade earth toward these natural collection sites so water runs into them, not away. And wherever possible, plant drought-tolerant native species to reduce the need for water.



Lavender, pride-of-Madeira, and white-leaved dusty miller (*Centaurea gymnocarpa*) are all drought-tolerant.

Deep shade, bright sun

Steep hillsides and large mature trees can create pockets of sun and shade on a seasonal or even daily basis. Using plants that tolerate both sun and shade allows for continuity in garden design. Alternating plant material with mulches — gravel, stone or wood chips — is another good strategy. Use the mulch in the tricky areas of the "swash zone" — sometimes in shade, sometimes in sun.



Follow the slopes

Go with the natural contours of your land. If you have a steep hillside, build switchback paths, steps and terraced pocket gardens instead of trying to level out the entire area.

Make peace with wild critters

They were here first, and they're not going anywhere. Plan ahead to accommodate the critters that will inevitably end up passing through your garden. If you decide to trap them, use Have-A-Heart humane traps, or hire a humane animal-trapping and relocation service. Here are some critter-specific tips:

- **Skunks** love hidey-holes. Build decks high enough so they don't move in; store wheelbarrows, potting benches and kayaks in such a way that they don't create a den, and wire off any areas that could appear attractive as a skunk residence.
- **Gophers** like to travel above ground and below, and there is no sure preventative. You can, however, deflect gophers by installing subterranean barriers at least 3 feet deep to protect plant roots, selecting plants that are not on their menu and utilizing raised beds and planters.

—CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

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THE GREAT OUTDOORS

—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

by walls of river rock. And all those walls are the height of a chair. “So it’s a seat/wall,” Bennett says. “Of course you have your flat terrace with tables and chairs. But you also have the walls, so if guests are standing and talking, they can put their drinks on the wall or use it as a seat. We needed the walls for soil retention, to create the terraces for outdoor living and entertaining.”

Grace built planter beds next to some retaining walls “so we could put some good, rich organic dirt in there and grow different types of plants — not necessarily native. We could sneak in some tomatoes, a veggie patch, all sorts of great stuff.” As for the many different microclimates on Bennett’s property, Grace says, “we took it all into consideration in planting. At the top of the lot, behind the house, it’s warmer. At the lot’s bottom, in front of the house, it’s cooler. So you look at a wall that will soak up and reflect sunlight and heat, and you think oranges might be good there. Or tomatoes and herbs. The herbs like it really hot.”

In other words, what looks like a simple garden project turns out to be a masterful manipulation of the Arroyo’s resources and ecological eccentricities.



An ornamental metal sprinkler with a 35-foot diameter watering pattern nurtures the vegetable garden.

Fire safety

Gardens that are fire-resistant — always a concern in Pasadena — are a must. Design and maintain a defensible space with vigilant management of overgrowth and a carefully managed perimeter of fire-resistant plantings that transitions into the natural habitat. Visit fire.ca.gov and defensiblespacesolutions.com/resources for specific guidelines.



—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

- **Raccoons** love water and big fat grubs. You know you’ve had a raccoon drive-by if your new sod is rolled up, mysterious holes are appearing in your garden beds, fruit is disappearing or your fountain is inexplicably muddy. Solutions include covering sod with plastic aviary netting held down with soil staples until it takes root, discouraging grub growth by allowing soil to dry out between waterings, netting fruits as they mature and building ponds with steep side walls and depths of 2 feet or more. Barriers such as a low decorative fence can also deter critters, as can the use of natural predator scents, available at your local nursery.

PHOTO: Holly Lepere (“Fire Safety”)



"WE PACKED SO MUCH INTO THE GARDENS THAT WRAP AROUND OUR HOUSE THAT I CAN'T EVEN TELL YOU EVERYTHING WE'RE GROWING."

Bennett says she and her husband enjoy their outdoor environment every bit as much as they enjoy the house.

"We packed so much into the gardens that wrap around our house that I can't even tell you everything we're growing," says Bennett, ticking off a partial list. "We have a rose garden, an herb garden, a vegetable garden, an orchard. We have fruit trees — fig, lemon, orange, plum, nectarine, apricot, espaliered apple trees. We have camellias, azaleas, hydrangeas, climbing vines and so much more. We look out any window of our house and we see nothing but nature." **AM**

Preserve native oaks

Mature native oaks are a natural treasure, a valuable landscape element and, if that's not persuasive enough, they're protected by law. The drip line — the ground beneath the outer circumference of a tree's branches — is their Achilles' heel: Changes there can damage or even kill the tree. In their natural habitat, oaks have adapted to seasonal winter rains and dry summers with very little undergrowth on stable soil (no erosion, no siltation). To maintain the natural balance, do not do any of the following: water the trunk, water in summer, keep the soil constantly moist, raise or lower the grade or compact or till within the root zone. Look for oak companion plants and irrigate appropriately.

Noninvasive plants

Use only noninvasive plant species at wildlife boundaries. Your local nursery can help you with selections, or visit monrovia.com for comprehensive plant profiles.

Everything changes with time

So too does a garden. Trees mature and senesce; both sun/shade patterns and the volume of leaf drop change as well. Even your taste changes, as new plants become available and strike your fancy while old plants pass their prime. Know that a garden is a dynamic thing and embrace it. Shift plants as conditions change. Add, subtract, simplify, renew, restore, rethink. As Keats might have mused, a living garden, well tended, is a joy forever. **AM**

Margie Grace heads Grace Design Associates (gracedesignassociates.com) in Santa Barbara. An award-winning landscape designer who also holds a B.S. in biology and geology, Grace first fell in love with gardening growing up in the hills of Altadena.

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