

# Serenity In Santa Barbara

Grace Design Associates Inspires A Native Texan  
In Realizing Her California Dream Garden

BY FRANK NELSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOLLY LEPERE







“I guess there is a little old Englishwoman in me somewhere,” says Debbi Wilson, a vivacious fifty-seven year old who kept her dream alive over many years by filing away magazine clippings along with other garden design ideas that caught her fancy.

No wonder, then, after she and her husband Frank moved from San Antonio to Santa Barbara, Debbi was eager to blow the dust off those files and let her imagination run riot.

And that’s pretty much what’s been happening ever since the couple bought a three bedroom house along a private lane that winds up into the foothills above Montecito and the coastal village of Summerland.

But not everything was completely rosy. When Debbi first saw the place, she was entirely underwhelmed. Built in 1979 and described as “California territorial adobe style,” the 3,200 square foot house was unappealing and there was little semblance of a garden.

“My initial instinct was, I didn’t like it,” she says. “I didn’t even want to go inside when we arrived for the open house.” But upon closer investigation, her instincts told her to be open to the potential for developing the garden of her dreams on this site.

The couple also craved a home with surrounding land, which this property offered. “Don’t forget, we are from Texas,” says Debbi, who travels the world buying and selling rare pieces of estate and antique jewelry while Frank, sixty-six, invests in oil exploration.



OPPOSITE In the newly-created entertaining and entrance area to the house, visitors can relax in the shade of yuccas and an old acacia tree on this comfortable sandstone seat. TOP The parking area of the house has been softened with this succulent court from which a pair of 19th century European wood and iron screen gates lead into the garden. ABOVE This glazed pot fountain, standing in a shallow pond, is one of several water elements adding to the serenity of the Wilson’s garden.





OPPOSITE Those staying in the guesthouse only have to step outside to find this enchanting spot, ideal for a morning coffee or a cup of afternoon tea amidst the bougainvillea rosenka.

TOP RIGHT Debbi Wilson loves pots and vases of all shapes and sizes, and makes full use of them around her Santa Barbara garden. TOP She could not resist this cow, painted by well-known Texas artist Brad Braune, when it was auctioned at a fundraiser for the American Cancer Society.

Today "Heidi" is very much at home in the Wilson's whimsical garden. ABOVE This relaxation area will eventually be gloriously shaded by a "living umbrella"—Boston ivy climbing over the remains of a large umbrella now planted in a pot and reinforced with chicken wire.

Their house sits on 1.3 acres surrounded by canopies of oaks, eucalyptus and other native trees, yet still maintains ocean views to one side and rolling hills melting into hazy mountains on the other.

Among the magazine articles Debbi treasured featured a garden designed by local landscape designer, Margaret Grace. "Instinctively, I felt she was a soulmate and I was so pleased when I learned she lived here," she says, referring to the owner of Santa Barbara based Grace Design Associates.

"I have these esoteric, whimsical ideas, and Margie is on the same wavelength. Once I contacted her, we just went to town."

Pots, vases, statues and other assorted artistic creations—some trophies from yard sales and auctions, others sentimental family favorites—pop up all over the garden. Near the orchard, for example, a mossy chair and a small table, both cascading flowers, stand next to an old bed covered in a thick duvet of lobelias, pansies and sweet alyssum.

Margie estimates she spent about a month swapping ideas with Debbi and working on the garden design before turning loose her ten-member construction crew for another two and a half months. By then the various elements had been knitted together in what she refers to as "a series of cohesive gardens, vista points and vignettes."

Margie, who says she and Debbi are now friends as well as kindred spirits, is looking forward to their collaboration on possible future projects—perhaps a rose garden, lawn swing, creekside sitting area and a roof garden for the guesthouse.

Debbi, too, is excited at the prospect of more creative adventures. "I think our garden will always be a work in progress," she says. "I certainly hope so. It's just so much fun." 



