

Vivid, Lush (and low-water)

DESIGNER MARGIE
GRACE INFUSES COLOR
AND TEXTURE INTO
A PRIVATE SANTA
BARBARA LANDSCAPE



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BY DEBRA PRINZING

Some gardens look so familiar that you can instantly spot the designer's hand in them, time and again. So it's a rare treat to view a landscape created by someone who has allowed her clients' own style to shine.

Helping homeowners channel their inner-gardenmaker isn't always easy, admits Margie Grace, co-principal with Dawn Close of Santa Barbara-based Grace Design Associates. "Usually they can't figure out what they want, because if they could, they wouldn't be calling me," she says. "But I always love it when my clients get what they really wanted."

For one couple who contacted Grace Associates after losing most of their landscape (but not their Spanish-style stucco residence, garage or guest house) to Santa Barbara's headline-grabbing 2008 Tea Fire, the garden of their dreams needed to satisfy both the practical and aesthetic. More than just replacing plants consumed by flames, the renovations had to provide a sense of serenity and security for the family who lived here.

Located in the foothills above Santa Barbara, the two-acre site slopes downward to a steelhead trout creek at the bottom of a ravine. The cultivated landscape occupies one-half-acre, including areas just above and below the residence.

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A hillside of drought-tolerant perennials provides beauty for the owners and nectar for pollinators. (opposite); The "spool"—part spa, part pool—a refreshing water source. (above)

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOLLY LEPERE/GRACE DESIGN ASSOCIATES



An oversized cedar hot tub was added as a place to soak on summer days, and it doubles as an emergency water source.





Paths run across a slope planted with low-water, low-maintenance flora (above). Grace chose “un-thirsty” perennials that provide her client with color and flowers for cutting (opposite).

Grace listened for clues as the husband and wife discussed the “what ifs.” In response, she created several distinct places where both social and solitary moments would suit the way they live. Grace also conjured colorful displays to satisfy the woman of the home’s wishes: “She was hungry for green and a saturated palette,” the designer recalls. “It works here because the light is really bright and flower colors don’t wash out.” Vibrant, un-thirsty plants explode in what Grace calls “floriferous pockets” such as along a sunny slope below a private terrace, where hot pink Peruvian lilies (*Alstroemeria* sp.), amethyst-hued salvias (including a cultivar called ‘Mystic Spires Blue’), yellow blanket flowers (*Gaillardia* sp.) and orange lion’s tails (*Leonotis leonurus*) now thrive. The homeowner can easily step outside and pick a bouquet, no matter the time of year.

Lavish displays of burgundy, chartreuse, silver-blue



and dark green succulents (planted in gravel) provide texture and interest close to the home's entry and in containers placed along patios and pathways. New stone walls and terracing define the outdoor areas, including an intimate patio off of the master bedroom, a sitting area adjacent to new vegetable planters, a spacious entertaining patio and a meadow planted with native species. Winding paths connect many of these spaces, satisfying both Grace's and her client's desire that the landscape provide interesting journeys where nature and wildlife can be observed. "We needed areas that were also suited to people," Grace explains. For example, she varied the widths of the walkways to add interest and "places to pause."


In addition to expanded outdoor living space, renovations addressed slope stability issues, improved circulation, and greatly reduced water use and maintenance. "We wanted the garden to blend with the surrounding wilderness, and also to protect the property from fire in the future," Grace explains.

Budget was clearly a concern, since insurance only covered a fraction of the required renovations. Grace saved and recycled what she could (existing concrete, gravel, and stone) and added plant donations from her own garden and those reclaimed from other job sites, such as easy-to-transplant succulents and agaves. Thankfully, many fire-charred mature trees, including California sycamores and coast live oaks, eventually leafed out again. Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*) and lemonade berry (*Rhus integrifolia*), as well as other native shrubs and a few alder trees, have also re-sprouted in the wilder areas of the property.

Designer and clients alike knew they needed to

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To work within a modest budget, Grace populated the landscape with donated plants such as agaves, and used, recycled, and salvaged stone.

California natives and drought-tolerant Mediterranean plants breathe new life into a rugged landscape. A pleasing palette of colorful succulents (opposite).





create a safer, fire-resistant landscape plan. They used native sandstone, gravel, and decomposed granite and flagstone, creating “breaks” between plantings to reduce the risk of fuel connectivity in the case of a future fire. Mulch holds in moisture and reduces water use in planting beds.

Rather than replacing a pre-fab Jacuzzi destroyed by the fire, Grace and her clients re-imagined the soothing role of water. “Visually, we needed to see water,” Grace acknowledges. “It gets hot here in the summer. But we didn’t need a massive pool. My client said she just wanted to push off one edge and glide to the other end in one breaststroke.”

The solution? A circular body of water that feels like a swimming hole but is actually an oversized cedar hot tub, tucked into a sloping grade below the home. Grace calls it a “spool”—part spa, part pool.

There’s a lighthearted feeling to this landscape, one of hope and happiness, in spite of its tragic past. To Grace, the design is a success because the garden owner’s personality is apparent. “There is authentic self-expression here,” Grace says. “And that’s not from me; it’s the homeowner.”

