

Sandy Slice of Heaven

BY NANCY RANSOHOFF

THE BEACHES THAT LINE the Santa Barbara County coast like a glittering sandy necklace are spectacular and special places. What truly sets them apart is that they're pristine and relatively undeveloped, with houses on the beach only on short stretches. Padaro Beach is one of those coveted stretches, with unpretentious houses sprinkled along the locals' secret sandy swath. Folks here appreciate its rustic beauty while surfing, tide pooling or just soaking up the ever-changing Pacific views with the Channel Islands looming on the horizon.

Room With a View

Those views are what inspired a unique "backyard" landscape design project for a busy family beach house. The space between the home's back deck and the public beach was transformed to create a sort of outdoor room, with the sand level raised to enhance the views. The end result is a casual, inviting gathering place for flip-flopped family and friends that blends seamlessly into the natural surroundings.

"We raised the soil level by 16 to 18 inches to allow views of the beach—before, it felt like there was a barricade between you and the ocean—you were sitting in a hole, with the house and deck looming over it, looking at boulders. It was unusable space," says Margie Grace, principal at Grace Design Associates, who designed and built the project. "We imported a heck of a lot of beach sand—five truckloads. They sell it for volleyball courts...we brought it back one wheelbarrow at a time."

Grace notes that the user-friendly seaside space sees a lot of activity. "It's all about the beach when the family is there, and this space is the transition between the house and the beach. Gear like surfboards, boogie boards and kayaks gets dragged across. We wanted it to be beautiful, useful and low maintenance—no fuss, no muss."



Succulents, like the mix shown above, in a custom-made cement pot, are low-maintenance and deal very well with the salt air, an important consideration for beach living. Opposite: Grace Design Associates created this curved flagstone bench/low wall combination that blends into existing granite boulders and cleverly guards against erosion.

Set in Stone

While describing the collaborative design process, the homeowner notes that he and Margie Grace were on the same page from the get-go. "Margie had the vision...she sees in her mind's eye how it's all going to work out," he notes. As an example of her vision, he points out the curved flagstone bench/low wall combination that blends into existing granite boulders. Called riprap, the boulders guard against erosion and were artfully incorporated into the overall design.

"We wanted to make the boulders part of the yard," says Grace, who studied geology in addition to landscape design and comes from a family of geologists. "I get excited about rocks," she says.

"We used dry-stacked flagstone for the low dry-stacked fieldstone walls—the greys

and browns in the color palette match what was there," says Grace. The bench faces an inviting fire pit that melds beauty and function, composed of chunks of clear and aquamarine refractory glass that evoke the colors of the sea. "We love gathering around the fire pit...it puts out great heat," notes the homeowner. "Margie sourced the surrounding flat stone slabs [around the fire pit] that are almost a perfect match to the riprap."

Custom contemporary furniture placed around the fire pit includes lounge chairs that encourage relaxing, digging toes into the sand and catching the sunset. The sturdy chairs and small tables were designed and built by Maysun Wells of Wells Concrete Works in Los Osos of materials that hold up well outdoors. Pre-cast concrete is embedded with sea glass, aggregate



PHOTOS: HOLLY LEPERE



The ocean view is complemented by an inviting fire pit composed of chunks of clear and aquamarine refractory glass that evoke the colors of the sea.

and ammonites (fossil shells), then ground and polished for the bases. Slats of ipe wood form the chair backs and seats and the tabletops for a sleek look. It's a soul-soothing place to sit and watch couples walk down the beach hand in hand, enjoy the dolphins leaping offshore, and listen to waves unfurl and flags flap in the ocean breeze.

Shades of Green

Carefully chosen plants that thrive in this environment add a palette of green shades from sage to silvery. "We wanted plants that are drought resistant and hardy but not just cactus," says the homeowner. Spikes of Canyon Prince wild rye grass are interspersed with silver-white leaves of the low-spreading licorice plant. "We chose plants that are tough as nails, that could take being ignored and hardly even watered," says Grace. She extended that theme to the back deck with large custom-made cement pots of mixed low-maintenance succulents. "They have a gift for dealing with salt," says Grace.

Family Living

And what's better after a day at the beach than a shower, especially outdoors. "I always wanted an outdoor shower," says the homeowner, who surfed until sunset the previous evening. Tucked off to the side of the backyard, near the overhang of the back deck, the shower with its minimalist stainless steel design is complemented by a tall vertical stone slab placed as a back-splash just behind it. A handy tree stump sits nearby, providing the perfect spot for wetsuit changing. And no need to step back into the sand after a shower—pavers of sandblasted precast concrete are spaced across the "room" and form a small floor at the bottom of the back deck steps.

This beachy backyard is clearly a place that is lived in, enjoyed and appreciated. A weathered teak bench sits to the side next to a greenery-draped fence that borders the property. Although eye-catching in its rustic beauty, the well-used bench also serves as a resting spot after the family's forays into the sea or a place to plop fins after surfing. "It [the backyard] is comfortable and relaxed and real life happens there," says Grace. Around the bench, groupings of small rocks are placed in the sand, decoratively painted in bright colors by the kids with sayings such as "Live to Surf, Surf to Live" and "Enjoy the View." ♦

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