

**SANTA BARBARA  
NEWS-PRESS**

---

# HOME & 1 Garden

## Setting their SITES on Sustainability

S.B. projects among those participating in pilot program

JUNE 12, 2010

**K. Reka Badger, News-Press Correspondent**

If you're seeking tips for creating a greener home and garden, there's a helpful program in the works. The Sustainable Sites Initiative (SITES) aims to establish standards and practices to help landscape architects, garden designers and homeowners build projects to the best environmental advantages.

An interdisciplinary effort led by the American Society of Landscape Architects, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center at the University of Texas at Austin and United States Botanic Garden, SITES will be the nation's first voluntary rating system for sustainable landscapes, with or without buildings. It will serve as a vital adjunct to the U.S. Green Building Council's program, Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED), which specifically addresses building practices.

To evaluate the efficacy of the proposed rating system, SITES' administrators have selected 175 projects from 34 states and countries, including Canada, Iceland and Spain, to participate in a pilot program. Projects run the gamut from business parks and transportation corridors to private homes and open spaces.

"It's time to think about the big picture: how we handle waste during construction, how we treat our soil, how we handle erosion concerns," says landscape designer Margie Grace, principal of Grace Design Associates in Santa Barbara.

The pilot program, during which designers and builders will complete the selected projects, runs June 2010 to June 2012. Feedback from participants will play an important role in determining the final rating system, which involves a four-star model of awards based on a 250-point scale.

"SITES says things like 'Preserve the structure of the soil,' " Ms. Grace explains, " 'If you must scrape top soil, save it,' and 'Put solids in a detention basin to be picked up.' There are points for reusing materials on-site, for being close to the park or bus, for infilling or rehabilitating."



*Celebrating the groundbreaking at Victoria Garden Mews, part of a pilot program aimed at developing standards for sustainable landscaping, are, from left, contractor/owner Dennis Allen, then-Santa Barbara Mayor Marty Blum, Councilman Grant House, architect Dennis Thompson and owners Devon Hartman, Jenny Cushnie, Kathy Bush and Mary Beierle. MICHAEL STEVENS PHOTO*

Among the Santa Barbara-based projects selected for the pilot program are Coyote House, a private residence in Montecito, a project of Blackbird Architects, Van Atta Associates, Paul Franz Construction, RJ Foil Landscape, and the UCSB Ocean Sciences Center, by EHDD Architecture, Penfield and Smith and UCSB.

A third, called Victoria Garden Mews, combines the best of 19th and 21st century building techniques. Owner/builder Dennis Allen (principal of Allen Associates) partnered with architect Dennis Thompson, designer/builder Hartman Baldwin and Ms. Grace to transform a crumbling Victorian house on a large lot into a model infill home for four families.

Victoria Garden Mews features a fully restored historic building, a stacked, three-unit condominium with hydraulic car lifts to minimize garage space and a passive solar design, as well as photovoltaic panels, to provide electricity. From the beginning, the designers and builders worked as a team to streamline the process and take advantage of one another's expertise.

"Landscapers often are brought in after the project is completed," says Bryan Henson, a builder with Allen Associates, "but the integrated approach makes it so people don't have to redo work or change things. It seems like a simple idea, but it typically isn't done that way.

"For example," he continues, "Margie helped us figure how much landscaping water we'd need and we used that info to design in a rainwater catchment system to meet those needs. As we're designing that system, she's participating. When we have open trenches, we ask if she needs anything, so when she comes to install, we're not digging up things."

The team has completed restoration of the 1880-vintage house, so Ms. Grace will begin landscaping the front of the project in July. She plans to put in a small lawn of UC Verde buffalo grass and to create a flower-filled garden appropriate to the Victorian period.

"The plan is that everything will be low-water demand and to have lots of edibles," Ms. Grace says.



*Landscape designer Margie Grace follows SITES guidelines by using elements like this apple lattice fence, a vertical accent and barrier with a bonus crop of edible fruit. HOLLY LEPERE PHOTO*



*Although this rendering of Victoria Garden Mews shows a large lawn in front, designer Margie Grace plans to reduce the turf in favor of a floriferous garden of drought-tolerant plants. COURTESY ALLEN ASSOCIATES*

“Between the front and three back units will be a community space with a fountain, fruit trees and a veggie garden that everybody can work.

“We’re going vertical,” she adds, “so for some of our screening, we’ll have an ‘apple fence’ and an espaliered fig. That’s a lot of food with a small footprint.”

Other plants will include watsonia; hen and chicks (*Echeveria ‘Imbricata’*); juniper (*J. conferta* ‘Blue Pacific’); herbs, such as rosemary, oregano, sage and thyme; and wildlife-attracting plants, such as penstemon, lavender and purple love grass (*Eragrostis spectabilis*).

“The Sustainable Sites Initiative is the first nationwide conversation about how sites and buildings interact,” Ms. Grace declares, “and how they interact with geology, biology, climate and plant community. Deciding the best way to design for the use of a site, all of a sudden you’re talking about social issues and community.

“Now that we have SITES as a tool,” she adds, “it’s something to put forward to get designers and builders working together. We find that’s the most sustainable thing we can do because then our goals are the same. We’re all thinking about integrated systems and how the whole works together.”

Green Showcase home tours of Victoria Garden Mews will begin upon completion of the project in early 2011. For more information, go to [victoriagardenmews.com](http://victoriagardenmews.com).

To learn more about the Sustainable Sites Initiative, go to [sustainablesites.org](http://sustainablesites.org).

*K. Reka Badger is a Master Gardener and makes her home in Templeton. E-mail her at [life@newspress.com](mailto:life@newspress.com).*