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TASTE** The people, places, and
designs that influence
every day of our lives.

In the Garden

By Billy Goodnick



SANTA BARBARA'S OUTDOOR STYLE

Landscape designer Margie Grace has an eye for effortless elegance.

FROM THE STREET, Margie Grace's cottage-style house and office fit nicely within her residential Santa Barbara neighborhood. Unlike the homes of some of this award-winning landscape designer and contractor's well-heeled clients, Grace's house doesn't have dramatic ocean vistas, ornate swimming pools, or classic statuary. But her garden—equal parts outdoor living room, produce mart, conference room, storage yard, and experimental laboratory—demonstrates that the mind of a creative designer is at work here.

Grace's garden has a subtle, relaxed beauty and fits the way she lives and works. It also embodies her form-follows-function approach, often reflected through her work at Grace Design Associates (gracedesignassociates.com). Asked about her style, however, she replies, "I don't have a style."

But she most certainly has talent (along with armloads of awards as well as having her projects featured in national magazines, on TV shows, and shown on prestigious garden tours.) Grace's creations have

This garden showcases how Margie Grace (far right) uses classic forms—including symmetrically arranged walls, paths, and fountains—to suggest an Old World ambience. The sunken garden whispers with the sound of water, and the pastel flowers are colorful but not overpowering.



Refinement and wildness meet at the back gate, where golden grasses are left in their natural state and a pepper tree shades a welcoming bench. Above, left: Grace traded her thirsty home-office lawn for a relaxing outdoor living room accented with Mediterranean-climate plants that need little care and deliver year-round interest.

an effortless elegance and restraint. Her designs range from gentle and naturalistic to bold and urban, traditional to contemporary; they may end up looking whimsical and sometimes romantic.

“I start every project by getting to know my client,” Grace says. “I also listen to what the site tells me. The style of the garden grows from there.”

Since 1982, her company has conceived and built more than 350 gardens in Southern California and the western states. Her work is in demand because her gardens strike a balance between beauty and fulfilling her clients’ practical needs. While she has no trouble meeting the high expectations of the heads of Fortune 500 companies, she’s equally comfortable rescaling her ideas to fit modest budgets and lot sizes.

“My job is to create a stage for people to live their lives, so I take my time getting to know them,” says Grace. “I pay attention to the climate and shape of the land, but I also look beyond the confines of the yard, borrowing scenery the way Japanese gardens have for centuries.” In her own garden, for example, the edges of the lot are

blurred by shrubs and vines hiding the fence and lifting the eye to tall trees on neighboring properties.

Building gardens that are beautiful and usable doesn’t stop Grace from applying the principles of sustainability in her work. Maybe, she says, it has something to do with her frugal upbringing in a family with five kids: “I remember my mom stripping the seats out of our family VW van after an earthquake ravished neighboring homes in [her hometown of] Altadena,” she says, explaining how they made space to pack in re-claimed materials. “We hauled away bricks (with permission, of course) and used them in our own garden, way before ‘recycle’ and ‘reuse’ were buzzwords.”

She also attributes her strong sense of environmental stewardship to her Girl Scout years. “Scouting left me with a love of the outdoors and a leave-a-place-better-than-you-found-it attitude.” Years later, those values still resonate in her work.

Grace builds sustainability into all her projects. She also prefers local materials like Santa Barbara’s coveted sandstone rather than imported materials that have to be shipped long distances. Plants

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are chosen for their appropriateness to the climate to avoid wasting water. If a client needs a lawn for recreation, Grace responds with a “smart lawn,” which is no larger than necessary, employs low-water-using turf varieties, and irrigates with a high-tech controller that adjusts to real-time site weather conditions.

Grace would like to see people invite more of nature into their yards. “I want to capture as many components of the native biome as possible, removing obstacles and creating linkages between the garden and wild spaces,” she says. Though she has yet to successfully entice owls to nest in her clients’ gardens (owls think gophers are yummy), she strives to create environments where birds, bees, lizards, frogs, and bats thrive and keep garden pests in check. (On a recent project, she left the bottom boards off a fence so a local skunk family could pass through the yard unimpeded. Not only do they refrain from discharging their odiferous calling card, but the family cat has been seen joining their nightly parade.)

In keeping with the idea of setting the stage for people’s lives, Grace also likes to leave parts of the garden wild to serve as outdoor learning environments for kids. “Mowed grass doesn’t attract much of anything interesting,” she says, reflecting on the notion of capturing the components of the native biome. “It’s a lot more fun to have a backyard field lab where kids watch butterflies hatch from cocoons.” ■



In Your Own Garden

Limited space and tight budgets shouldn’t stop anyone from applying Margie Grace’s ideas. Beautiful, useful, sustainable gardens work at any scale from estate-size to small residential lots. She offers these tips:

PURPOSE Form follows function: Get the most out of your outdoor spaces. Design for the activities that expand your living space beyond the walls of the house. Think action verbs: dining, playing, snoozing, growing food.

DEMOLITION When it comes to old, overgrown plants, subtract ruthlessly. It’s hard to see what *could* be when all you see is what’s there now. Don’t be shy about ripping out plants and cleaning the slate.

VISION Tear pictures out of magazines for inspiration. Then look at the pictures you collected. If you can learn to recognize what you like and why you like it, you’ll have a better chance of creating a garden that’s right for you.

QUALITY Love it before you bring it home. Avoid impulse purchases and concentrate on a few good pieces that will bring enjoyment and last a long time.

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