

## Santa Barbara Woman named International Landscape Designer of the Year

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Reka K. Badger

### Life

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Margie Grace, founder and lead designer of Grace Design Associates Inc., takes pride in helping homeowners build functional landscapes that are both aesthetically pleasing and lifestyle enhancing. For nearly a decade, she and a dozen employees have tackled projects ranging from the overhaul of existing gardens to the design and installation of new plantings and hardscape features.

A licensed landscape contractor with 27 years of experience, Ms. Grace addresses the problems that can crop up in Santa Barbara-area real estate, including erosion, poor drainage, fire danger and traffic noise. Her solutions are innovative, environmentally sound and visually inviting.

"As a designer," Ms. Grace said, "I have to really listen to people who are asking me to help them. It's no more nor less than designing the stage upon which they live their lives."

The gardens of Grace Design Associates (687-3569 or [gracedesignassociates.com](http://gracedesignassociates.com)) have appeared on HGTV's "Landscapers' Challenge" and Discovery Channel's "Greenovate," as well as in numerous publications, including Santa Barbara Seasons, California Homes, Garden Design and Sunset.

The firm won the Builder of the Year for Best Landscape and Hardscape award from the Santa Barbara Contractors Association seven times and a Green Building of America Award in 2009. Topping the accolades, the Association of Professional Landscape Designers has named Ms. Grace 2009's International Landscape Designer of the Year.

"I thought that was pretty cool," she told the News-Press. "In this field, you're off doing your projects and you don't get much feedback from other people. Coming from my peers, (the award) really means something to me.

"Plus you get the pulpit for awhile," she added with a laugh, "and I do have some things to say."

Among those things is that individual gardens can be considered in a larger context, one that involves the way the entire community, including neighboring people, plants and critters, "plays, works and lives."



Margie Grace, lead designer of Grace Design Associates, incorporates a 'borrowed view' into a Santa Barbara garden by mirroring background hills with mounding succulents.

HOLLY LAPERE PHOTOGRAPHY

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For instance, "if you're redoing your yard, can we capture as many elements of the native biome as possible?" Ms. Grace, of Santa Barbara, asked. "Can we knock out a piece of this fence so the smaller animals can have a corridor? Can we include something for the salamanders?"

"It's kind of cool," she added, "to play in that bigger context."

Ms. Grace integrates her landscape designs into the surroundings by dissolving visual boundaries and incorporating "borrowed views" of the mountains, trees and scenery beyond the property lines. She does this by framing the view or linking it with the garden by using similar elements.

"If it's a big oak tree two lots down," she said, "I might plant an oak tree on the property. The eye links the two and it makes the place feel bigger.

"We can do it with color and materials, too," she continued. "If there's a sandstone outcropping in the background, we use sandstone in the yard. We're painting a picture, but the midground and background aren't even on the property!"

For those looking for help with their gardens, Ms. Grace recommends finding a designer who listens attentively and who understands all aspects of a given site.

"Know what you want," she advised. "Knowing what you don't like is really helpful, too. And be open."

In her experience, putting the design and construction teams together as soon as possible can benefit all aspects of a project.

"Garden design is a labor-intensive art and we can really impact things from the sustainability end if we're in early," she said. "We can protect the site, put protective fencing around trees, make sure irrigation systems support perimeter plantings during construction."

Ms. Grace can also designate non-garden areas where painters may clean their tools, have demolition crews take out unwanted hardscape features and have workers save scrap materials for building walkways and retaining walls later.

Raised in Southern California, Ms. Grace attended UC Santa Cruz, where she earned a bachelor's degree in biology, with a minor in geology. She worked for the National Park Service as a seasonal ranger, and studied illustration at UCLA and Santa Barbara City College.

"I came to Santa Barbara in 1979 for one year of school," she laughed, "and forgot to leave."

Grace Design Associates has built more than 150 gardens, "both simple and incredibly complex," in California, New Mexico and Arizona. Ms. Grace herself can be seen in the field, loppers or design plans in hand, ready to fine-tune another leafy, living work of art.

***K. Reka Badger is a Master Gardener who writes from her home near Templeton. Her column appears every other week in the Home & Garden section. E-mail her at [life@newspress.com](mailto:life@newspress.com).***



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MARGIE GRACE