

April 2008

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curb adorable

BUILDING A VISION OF **HOME BEGINS AT THE FRONT GATE**





There's curb appeal, and there's curb adorable, as Rich and Krista Coffin discovered when designing their ideal home in Montecito, California. They could have done a quick fix to the front yard by skirting the foundations with evergreen plants and rolling out the lawn turf. But they chose to go the extra mile and transform the area into a beautiful, life-affirming garden that says, "Welcome to the home of our dreams."

Rich and Krista, partners in a construction company, have built a number of luxury homes in the area. When it came to building their own home, they felt it should have something of the showcase about it—and a landscape to match. But the couple also wanted an adaptable, livable home and garden, with all the features necessary to accommodate their family and its many activities. (Their two sons, Connor, 13, and Parker, 11,

are archetypal California boys, living with surfboards glued to their feet.) "We wanted the place to speak to us in a language we could understand," says Rich. That meant surrounding the Spanish Colonial-style home with a suitable—and beautiful—garden. Considering that a house is the single biggest purchase a person is likely to make in a lifetime, the Coffins realized the worth of investing in the landscape. (According to a survey conducted in mid-2007 by the National Association of Home Builders, well-executed landscaping is one of the top 10 ways to add value to your home.)

Enter landscape architect Margie Grace. "Rich and Krista had a clear vision of what they wanted," she says. But, as Rich notes, "There were times when Margie said, 'That won't fly,' and it paid us to listen to the expert."



The sturdy shrub *Abutilon megapotamicum* produces these delicate bell-like flowers.

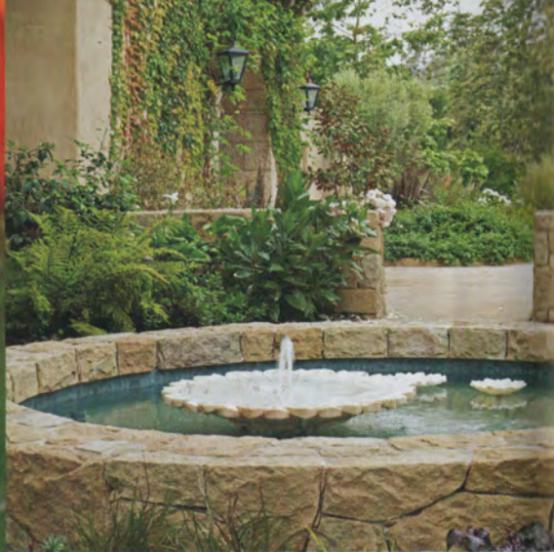
Opposite: The path from the street leads through a grove of olive trees, with a cloud of lavender and catmint blanketing the ground.

Left: Connor, Rich, Krista, and Parker Coffin.

Bottom left: Beyond the swimming pool, flower borders harmonize with the interior decor.

Below: Cherry-red pelargonium flowers frame a decorative bas-relief plaque.

Preceding pages: A purple chive flower hints at the dark-toned foliage colors from plants like purple-leaved plum trees (*Prunus cerasifera* 'Nigra') and wine-red *Euphorbia amygdaloides* 'Purpurea' that fill the garden and crowd around the entrance gate.



Right: Behind the house is a small organic garden that provides plenty of fresh herbs and vegetables for the family to enjoy.
Below: Fuchsia flowers trail over a decorative urn beneath *Brugmansia aurea*.
Far left: 'Iceberg' is a repeat-flowering rose.
Center: Golden orange *Alstroemeria* 'Ligtu Hybrids' are used throughout the garden to complement the purple foliage plants.
Left: The ornamental pool at the entrance makes the front garden a place to linger.
Far left, bottom: A stone-paved island set into the lawn is furnished with a pair of deck chairs to create a restful spot at one end of the swimming pool.



ILLUSTRATION: ANNI BOVAJIAN



So they worked as a design/build team, with Rich doing the grading and installing the hardscape, while Grace and her crew did the lighting, planting, and irrigation system.

"The site is about five acres in all and backs up to the Santa Ynez Mountains," explains Grace, "so dealing with drainage was an issue if we didn't want the garden to wash away." In fact, Grace's first piece of advice to anyone making a new garden is: "Get the drainage right." Also, she advises, "Get the soil in good condition. Get solid foundations for hardscaping. Then think about planting schemes and color combinations."

"For me, a Mediterranean garden is the epitome of romance," says Krista. "The scent, the soft pastels of lavender-blue flowers and gray foliage are just perfect." With that in mind, Grace designed a front entry garden defined by a low stone wall, a

fountain, and beds filled with lavender and other Mediterranean herbs, all planted in a small grove of olive trees. To give the entry garden a feeling of maturity, Grace planted the trees on raised berms of soil to increase their height. A tree that appears tall sitting in its pot on the nursery ground will look shorter when it is planted. Raising the planting site takes care of this.

The Coffins have a holistic approach to life, and part of the garden is devoted to raised vegetable beds that are managed organically. The beds that run along a narrow path behind the main house supply just enough produce to supplement the family diet. Across the street, there's an orchard filled with a variety of fruit and nut trees. A small bench is tucked beneath the trees, and a little chicken coop is nearby; the chickens take care of ground pests, provide free-range eggs, and bring life—

and giggles—to the little orchard. "It's a fun place for the family to relax," says Grace, observing that there are few things more amusing than watching fancy chickens bob and peck, "and they will become quite tame, too."

Other areas around the garden are devoted to family gatherings, like the fire pit halfway along the walkway that runs through the raised border at the garden's farthest edge. This border segues into the hillside and marks the divide between cultivated garden and wilderness. As a comfortable platform for observing local wildlife, the garden walkway is hard to beat. Simple rustic chairs circle the little fireplace, and s'mores are often on the menu. Closer to the house there's a pergola-covered patio for family breakfasts; the kitchen is just through the French doors, so catering is convenient.

Sited opposite the main window of the formal living room there's a deep mixed border of herbaceous perennials and shrubs whose colors have been deliberately chosen to repeat the palette of the interior decor. "Often clients get stuck on color-theming a garden," says Grace. "But using a color scheme that you already like helps the planning."

An old gardening rule of thumb advises, "Make the entrance to your garden from the best room of your house." If that's not possible, consider doing what the Coffins did, and make the view of the garden from the best room. It will enhance not only the exterior room but the interior as well—and give added meaning to the well-known phrase "pretty as a picture." ■

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