

Superior Sites: A Natural Beauty

A West Design/Build Company Casts a “Flowerful” spell on this Hillside Landscape

Tucked in the rolling foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains, the Erickson residence is not unlike the many other ranch-style homes that have proliferated in the outskirts of Los Altos since U.S. 280 was constructed nearby in the early ‘70s. Perched atop of sloping 1-acre lot, the rectangular, stucco residence appears to be the typical California home. Not as typical, though, is the Erickson’s landscape. Befitting the opening pages of a romance novel, the garden is fashioned into distinct rooms—each creating a unique mood through intertwining textures and colors. One can almost picture a lovelorn character contemplating fate in the vine-covered grape arbor that is perched above the breezy meadow sprinkled with wildflowers. The garden’s resemblance to a colorful Impressionistic painting is no coincidence. **Kathryn Mathewson**, primary designer of the Erickson’s landscape, believes that the art of garden design is what is missing in today’s American landscapes.

“Most people in the industry treat landscape like stagnant spaces, but landscapes are growing and changing things,” she says. Based in San Francisco, **Mathewson’s** two companies—**Kathryn Mathewson Associates**, Landscape Designers; and **Secret Gardens** (landscape contractors)—work as one to further her vision of garden creation. Tapping her educational background in biology and landscape architecture, Mathewson prefers to create gardens, rather than landscapes, that strike an environmental balance of form, texture, color and year-round appeal. Such balance is the beauty of the Erickson’s landscape; the multifaceted arrangement is both environmentally sound and aesthetically pleasing. The National Landscape Association recognized the project with a Superior Award in its 1989 awards program.

Situated on the San Francisco peninsula 40 miles south of the city, the Erickson’s residence overlooks the Santa Clara Valley and the San Francisco Bay. Residents of the area for more than 20 years, Evelyn and Victor Erickson decided in early 1985 to rebuild their landscape to create more active-use space for their large and growing family. The lot is naturally divided into three main sections: an upper level including the residence and a terrace; a middle level containing a large pool and encompassing patio; and a lower-level meadow. **Mathewson** began formulating a new design by addressing the various problems that plagued each of these areas.

One of the existing landscape’s most obvious shortcomings was the misshapen upper terrace---ironically, the most heavily used and viewed portion of the landscape. The previous construction offered merely a cramped and confining space, which **Mathewson** opted to reapportion. Separating the upper and middle levels was a rather steep hill blanketed with ivy. A typical feature of Bay-area landscapes, the Algerian ivy covering the slope provided little visual interest and attracted rats. **Mathewson’s** alterations, which included removing the ivy, building a pair of retaining walls and installing a kaleidoscopic array of new plants, gave the slope decidedly more appeal.

On the intermediate level, the major problem was the narrow patio encircling the pool. The pool area was “miserably hot with no trees or filtered light [and] no patio or sitting space in anything but full sun,” says **Mathewson**. After removing encroaching plants, **Mathewson’s** crew enlarged and re-covered the pool patio and replanted the

perimeter to provide some shade. The other major renovation on this level involved the summerhouse at the pool's southern end. Plans were made for a one-room structure, complete with kitchen, bathroom and dressing facilities, to replace a lanky, open-air shed. Used both for parties and as a guesthouse, the new 600 square-foot summerhouses is a formal focal point of the new landscape.

Over time, most of the plants in the previous landscape had deteriorated. Although the owners are plant-lovers, says **Mathewson**, than ran into trouble with the heavy clay soil on their property, which is touch on plants and difficult to work with. Consequently, the Ericksons had turned to container gardening to satiate their desire for colorful and healthy plants. “[Evelyn Erickson] really loves flower arranging,” says **Mathewson**, but with the previous landscape “she didn’t have the kinds of flowers she liked.” The existing landscape was also water-intensive, ways **Mathewson**, which made it difficult to maintain in the drought-stricken Bay area. Minimizing water use quickly became one of the central goals for the new design. **Mathewson’s** approach to water conservation is aptly presented in her company’s literature: “We do not believe that gardens must look brown and ugly when reducing water consumption. The garden does not suddenly stop because the water departments announce that we must cut our water consumption by not watering the garden. The garden is ever-changing and must continue to evolve and improve through an understanding of the many ways water [use] can be gradually reduced in a garden.”

In line with this philosophy, **Mathewson** incorporated a variety of Xeriscape techniques into the new landscape: enriching the soil; constructing a series of retaining walls; reducing turf area; establishing perimeter windbreaks and shade trees to reduce evaporation; and creating expanses that require little water. Traditional, water-intensive plants are grouped near the Erickson’s house for optimal enjoyment, while those plants requiring less water are spread throughout the landscape. The largest and most visible expanse is the meadow dotted with apricot, citrus and apple trees. Previously, this broad area was choked with annual weeds that remained brown for most of the year. And as California’s weeds do, these pests greened up in the winter, continually producing more weed seed. **Mathewson’s** crew completely eradicated the existing weed seeds, and, after enriching the soil, workers hydro seeded native fescue grass, poppies and wildflowers. **Mathewson** says the meadow now “stays green all year-round without much water.”

Mathewson’s crew began construction in fall of ’85 by demolishing most of the existing landscape features, with the notable exception of the pool. Aided by a Bobcat skid-steer loader, workers removed hardscape and plants alike, though **Mathewson** says they tried to save the property’s large trees whenever possible.

Amending the clay adobe soil, which proved to be crucial to the new landscape’s success, was the next task. This effort continued throughout the installation process, according to **Mathewson**. Workers amended the soil several times to formulate a lighter, loamy soil, instead of simply covering up the old soil with new. In total, the crew brought in 200 cubic yards of compost mixed with bark. Workers also rototilled minerals and natural ingredients, such as kelp, oyster shells and bone meal, into the mix. And in several areas, like the lawn and the meadow, workers added polymers to enhance water retention.

The crew made some minor grade adjustments in the slopes between the three levels. Since the intermediate level had been built on fill, **Mathewson's** design called for concrete pilings to support several of the new hardscape features. Workers poured 10-foot-deep pilings for the retaining walls and 30-foot deep pilings for the summerhouse. They next poured the concrete bases for these elements, as well as for the enlarged upper terrace. After fine-tuning more grades, workers installed an Irri-Trol irrigation system with 24 stations. The meadow is on one station and can be irrigated as little as once per summer, says **Mathewson**. The new plants around the pool are on another station and are irrigated twice a month, while the remaining stations service the more frequently irrigated shade garden and upper terrace perennial border.

At this time, workers also completed electrical trenching to accommodate the 80 light fixtures planned for the yard. They then built railroad tie steps leading from the pool level to the path that wind through the meadow. Decomposed granite and gravel are interspersed with more railroad ties to fill out the path, adding a rustic accent. The crew brought in large boulders to construct rock walls along the sides of the path at steep points. Simultaneously, other workers built another rock wall that encircles a vegetable garden between the pool patio and the meadow. **Mathewson Associates** then moved back to the upper levels to stucco and paint the concrete retaining walls. Workers installed four Haddenstone fruit baskets on the pillars of the newly built stairway between the upper and middle levels before covering this structure with stucco.

Next, a subcontractor came on site to construct the summerhouse Mathewson had designed. During this three-month job, **Mathewson's** own crew moved the unsightly pool equipment into a new equipment shed on the southern property line. The crew commenced planting as the summerhouse construction progressed. Once most large specimens were in place, workers began constructing the redwood grape arbor and fence adjoining the summerhouse kitchen. The grape arbor, which serves as a gateway of sorts between the pool and the meadow, features built-in benches covered with cushions and a wooden railing to accommodate dining accessories.

The crew continued to fill in the lot, which included sodding the lawn on the upper terrace and surrounding it with brick edging. By spring 1986, the majority of the new garden had been installed. "At that point, we basically stopped and didn't do anything for about a year," says **Mathewson**. "Everything was planted, but it wasn't as rich as I wanted it to be."

The contracting crew returned to the site in the spring of 1987 to complete a second round of installation tasks. Workers began by painting the grape arbor gray with white trim to match the colors **Mathewson** had chosen for the summerhouse and the newly repainted residence. Initially, the Ericksons had wanted to leave the redwood arbor natural, but they opted to paint it after the first year to continue the gray-and-white color scheme.

Mathewson's crew went on to complete the interior of the summerhouse, which included cabinetry work and more painting. During this stage, crewmembers also remodeled the pool by stripping the original coping and re-covering the surface with flagstone handmade tiles. Other workers installed the pool patio by placing the special-order Chinese flagstone within a border of rectangular dark gray slate slabs. The flagstone was "more expensive than any other item" on the project, according to **Mathewson**.

Next, a subcontractor constructed small upper-level pond and waterfall linking it the pool below. A dancing girl statue made of cast lead playfully sprays water into the pond, which is bordered with flat, irregularly shaped rocks. Workers then completed planting some areas of the lot that had not been entirely filled, such as the garden bordering the driveway.

By far the most striking aspect of the Ericksons' landscape is the masterful combination of more than 115 types of plants. The plant list includes many native species, as well as exotics from South Africa, the Mediterranean, Australia, and Mexico, which have climates similar to California's. "You're not going to see in the Bay area the combination of plants that you see in this garden," says **Mathewson**.

Mathewson created seven major gardens on the property, each of which presents a unique color and texture scheme. The most visible of these is the perennial bed on the upper terrace, which provides vistas to every major room in the residence. Here lacy forms and pastel flowers are underplanted with ground covers, such as *Armeria maritime* and *Aurinia saxatilis*. Plants around the pond and waterfall constitute the second major arrangement. In this section, plants cascade over the retaining walls, helping to hide the walls straight lines and adding verticality to the planting bed. **Mathewson** chose such drought-resistant species as *Yucca aloifolia* and *Arbutus unedo* "Compacta" to provide spatial variety to this oblong garden. At the northern end of the upper terrace, **Mathewson** designed a shade garden full of large trees, such as *Acer palmatum* and *Azara microphylla*.

The central terrace is a large and formal space, which was designed to accommodate many people and activities. In this fourth section of the landscape, bold textures of gray foliage and blue flowers complement the lucid blue pool and gray slate patio. At the pool's northern end, a tropical garden features *Arecastrum romanzoffianum*, *Cordyline indivisa* and *Phoenix canariensis*.

As the landscape extends out from the residence, the planting arrangements become more natural. For example, the plantings around the back of the summerhouse are distinct from those in front. Here *Alnus cordata* and *Betula pendula* provide shade to such understory plants as *Bellis perennis* and *Veronica repens*.

The meadow is the sixth distinct garden area and is planted with wildflowers like *Eschscholzia californica* and *Clarkia amoena*. Low grassy forms with red and orange flowers provide interest in the meadow among the existing fruit trees.

For perimeter plants, **Mathewson** chose dense shrubs to provide wind protection and tall ornamentals to screen neighboring property. Several eucalyptus species, along with *Rhamnus alaternus* and *Buddleia davidii*, fill out the landscape along the property's edges.

Mathewson's design also provides natural pest control for the garden. For example, diatomaceous earth (crushed fossil) was incorporated into the soil to control slugs and snails. Companion planting arrangements also discourage pests; society garlic is planted by roses to control aphids; oregano and yarrow in the upper terrace's perennial border keep white flies out; and *Euphorbia characias* 'Wulfenii' targets gophers. **Mathewson Associates** has also designed an electric eye controlled floodlight that harmlessly scares away raccoons.

Mathewson says her crew revisits the property once or twice a year to up date the garden, a concept she calls "creative maintenance." "We'll come in and do the major

things” like adding minerals to the soil and restaking the large trees, she says. Other tasks in the creative maintenance approach are pruning and propagating the perennial beds by division; pruning small trees and shrubs; modifying the irrigation system; and ensuring that the plants are fulfilling their intended functions, like softening hardscape lines or screening views of neighboring property.

The Ericksons already employ a gardener to attend to day-to-day needs. In addition, **Mathewson** helped the clients hire a part-timer to spend about four hours per week on the high-maintenance upper terrace garden.

So far, the Ericksons have spent about \$400,000 remaking their landscape. Yet this award-winning landscape is still not complete, says **Mathewson**. The next major phase will be the front garden. And the company will continue to update all parts of the garden as needed, according to **Mathewson**. This ongoing relationship between the garden and the creator is crucial to **Mathewson’s** approach – and this landscape’s success.

“Somehow our society has forgotten that the best gardens in the world were built when the designer was intimately involved with the construction, and when the garden was built over many years,” says **Mathewson** in her company’s literature.

“The true garden is a process, not a static ‘product’. A vital, ever-changing entity, the garden draws its owners into its evolution and enriches their lives.” The Ericksons now have just such a garden.

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