

“Kathryn Mathewson: Design/Build with Nature”

By Jeanne Price

“Man has attempted to control nature through paper designs and an instant installation process,” says **Kathryn Mathewson**, who believes this has produced gardens that are environmentally unhealthy and aesthetically barren. “The best gardens in the world were built when the designer was intimately involved with the construction and built over many years,” she adds. “Gardens are a process, not a product.”

Kathryn Mathewson Associates of San Francisco, the design arm of **Mathewson’s** firm, and **Secret Gardens**, her contracting company, captured highest honors in 1991 from the National Landscape Association. The award-winning project: a garden in the Berkeley hills that illustrates why **Mathewson** believes passionately in the design/build concept. She was contacted by the client to improve a back garden on a steep hillside. As **Mathewson** began to terrace the grade and angle a Japanese-inspired boardwalk through the trees from one room of the house to another, the client began to see her vision and decided to include the front room, too.

Because the original front garden was right on the sidewalk and bounded by a four-foot-high fence, the house’s window shades were always closed. **Mathewson** raised the fence height (incorporating the existing fence where possible) while adding hidden crannies in the fence for garbage pickup and mail delivery. She then softened the fence with cascading vines, turned the gate into a lockable “door,” and created a rock-walled terrace within the fence. “The first ‘room’ you enter now is the garden,” she explains. “The client can raise the shades and look out on a lush little garden instead of the street.”

It’s the looking out, not in, that’s important, believes **Mathewson**. Her client’s lovely art-filled dining room had a view of the Golden Gate Bridge through a chain-link railing, which **Secret Gardens** replaced with large wood-framed “windows” of unobtrusive welded-wire mesh. This was also done with a solid wood railing around the bedroom deck. For the first time in 27 years, the owners could see the Golden Gate from their bedroom. The dining room porch was transformed from a storage area for fireplace logs to an outdoor room enhanced by lighting, artwork and furniture—some of which was designed by **Secret Gardens**. In the garden, **Mathewson** discovered a tree the client had planted in memory of her first husband. She widened the surrounding area, included a bench and encouraged her client to create an arrangement with plants chosen by Mathewson and the client’s own rock collection. This sensitivity to the client’s memories is another advantage of design/build, **Mathewson** says: “As clients get to know you better, they talk to you in deeper, more intimate ways.”

Mathewson worked exclusively as a designer until 1982, when she added garden construction to her firm because she thought contractors didn’t understand the process of creating a garden. She came to landscape design by way of biology and excels in working with a wide and varied palette of plant colors and textures. The meeting of design sense with a rich understanding of the plant world is the “secret” of **Secret Gardens**. “We are constantly trying to introduce new plant combinations into our designs,” said **Mathewson**.

To **Mathewson**, soil is alive too. The introduction of natural products such as soymeal, kelp and ground oyster shells makes it naturally fertile. The micro-organisms in compost can turn even heavy Bay Area adobe into loamy, rich soil. She uses plastic tarps

and patience, not herbicides, to remove weeds. Healthy soil protects plants from extremes of temperature and, she claims, uses as much as 50 percent less water than soils doused with pesticides and synthetic fertilizers. Moreover, a garden that largely maintains its own balance of pests requires less labor, **Mathewson says**. Insects can be controlled by companion planting of insect-repelling plants and the introduction of natural predators. More plants species within a garden mean more insect species; plant diversity is therefore vital to a garden's health. The Berkeley garden has 75 species, while most residential gardens have 50 or fewer.

Because **Mathewson** believes gardens should be designed not only on paper but as they mature over time, **Secret Gardens** stays with its gardens, sometimes creating them over a period of years and visiting them annually to oversee irrigation and pruning as they grow and change.

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