

“Hello Garden; Goodbye Stress!”

By Dale Bryant

Kathryn Mathewson finds joy creating a serene garden sanctuary in a tiny condominium courtyard. Given the space and the freedom, she'd be delighted to create meadows, paths, and creeks in a client's back yard. Usually this San Josean takes on the challenge of designing peaceful, beautiful living spaces for people in cities and neighborhoods.

“In Paris I had my first positive sense of the word ‘urban’. People really live in the city there. There are tree-lined boulevards and public parks designed especially for walking, socializing and watching people. People go out at night and walk in these open spaces with no sense of fear,” she says.

Open Space Brings a Sense of Life to a City

By comparison, she says, “San Jose doesn't have a strong sense of quality open spaces which create strong neighborhoods and a much loved urban center. Decision-makers here don't really understand what an urban environment is.” For that reason, she works out of San Francisco in her own firm, **Kathryn Mathewson Associates and Secret Gardens**. “I've found a lot of reluctance in San Jose to talking about urban open space. In San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley, people are receptive to the idea of urban open space and neighborhood parks.”

Beautiful gardens, Mathewson believes, can help relieve the stress of modern-day life. Many of the health problems we have today are stress induced and we need to find ways to relieve this stress on a daily basis. “Even in back yards, gardens should be created with a sense of providing contrast to the world outside.” For this reason, she says she spends a lot of time taking concrete and asphalt out of people's back yards. “We have those things out there on the freeway and you need something different at home,” she feels.

Professional perspective

A landscape architect or designer, she says, can give a professional's perspective. “If you go down to the neighborhood nursery, the possibilities for your yard will be limited to the supply on hand—and that's usually only what sells well. In California, that usually means fast-growing, uninteresting plants.”

Like an interior designer, landscape professionals have access to wholesale merchandise and the experience to know where to find the unusual. Her advice to those who hire a professional is to ask lots of questions.

Her Suggestions

If you were to spend a little time with **Mathewson**, here are a few of the suggestions she would make:

- Consider installing a path because a path can lead you to a tranquil place in your garden.
- Imitate nature in your garden. What could be more restful than a babbling brook, a meadow or a grove of trees?
- Remember that repetition is restful. Think about the repetition of the trees in a forest.
- Running water is good for blocking outside sounds.
- Think about creating places to sit in your garden.
- Consider using drought-resistant plants.
- Think of how your garden will look from the windows of your home. Strive to make every window a picture.
- Think of outdoor space the same way you would a room in your home, and give it the same kind of personal attention.

Since earning her master's degree in landscape architecture and her bachelor's degree in biology, the Lincoln High School graduate has worked in New York with M. Paul Friedberg and Partners, Landscape Architects and Urban Designers, known for its innovative playgrounds. She has been a consultant in land-use problems to the National Park Service and was responsible for the landscape design and supervision of the Turnkey Program in Oakland, a low-income housing project. She developed and taught in the Urban Landscape Program at City University of New York and was a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Landscape Architecture Award.

Singapore Fling

She also spent nearly two years in Singapore where she developed the master plan for a park, design of two playgrounds and design of a pedestrian mall for the Singapore Parks Department and Singapore Housing Board. While there, she designed the garden for the American Embassy. "It was an exciting place for someone in my field to be working. It's truly a garden city, and the leaders are very receptive to new ideas and willing to spend a little money to try things," she says. Current projects include a garden courtyard at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and the West Park Plaza Shopping Center, Payne and Winchester Avenues.

Recently **Mathewson** conducted several tours of gardens in private homes on the peninsula as a part of the Creative Living and Learning series of the Fremont Union High School District Adult and Community Education Division. "I did the tours because I think people need to be exposed to good use of space in order to know what's possible in making good choices on their own use of space." She notes, "In communities where there is an effort to make creative use of urban space, the residents are often asked what they would like in their neighborhoods. That's fine if the people have been educated to what's possible."

Mathewson has some thoughts on public gardens in Santa Clara County as well as private ones. Both the Rose Garden and Willow Street Park earn high marks in her books as focal points of neighborhoods. It's no accident, she says, that both neighborhoods have been around for some time. Newer neighborhoods would have done well to use

these two neighborhoods—and their parks—as models for good use of public space. Montalvo, on the other hand, is a “hodgepodge,” she says, conceding the area right behind the main building is one of the most beautiful in the county. “A beautiful garden needs more than maintenance: you need to constantly work to improve it. Maybe Montalvo could add a landscape architect or garden designer to their artists and writers in residence program,” she suggested.

The Japanese Friendship Gardens also received low marks. “(They) are supposed to have been inspired by a park in our sister city of Okayama, Japan. I’ve been to that park in Japan, and believe me, something was lost in the translation.” In a world of cars and concrete, **Mathewson** believes people need a sense of peace and contentment. “Too often people pile in their cars and head for some place else to find that tranquility.” She and other environmentally concerned landscape specialists are working to help us stay at home and achieve serenity—whether home is a sprawling suburban house or an urban apartment.

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