

“REDOS AND DON'TS”

Is your yard a tangle of juniper, a geometric lawn and a slab of hot concrete? You can thank the aesthetic that turned America's downtown into squared-off seas of concrete and glass? Here's how to soften the angles.

The look marched from house to house – a crisp rectangle of lawn smartly bisected by a no-nonsense path pointing straight to the front door. A uniform row of prickly juniper disciplined into a tidy hedge. A prominent spot for the Ramble or Studebaker, a celebration of the era of the automobile and the end of wartime rationing of fuel and tires. A stark slab of patio shimmering in the backyard sun.

But in the past 10 years, the lines have softened. Landowners want plantings and features that reflect the natural environment and entice delicate hummingbirds and fluttering Pacific Monarchs. Gently curving edges and paths. A variety of plants in textures, layers and disparate heights to set off the home's architectural character. Outdoor art and garden accessories: objects and materials that evoke personal meaning for the user. Water sounds to create a tranquil environment – and drown out freeway noise, city clamor and the drone of neighbors' air conditioners.

“The trend in the past few years is toward the natural garden, taking cues from the landscape,” says Kathleen Norris Brenzel, editor of two of the West's most definitive landscape and garden books. “People want to attract wildlife, to use plants that fit our Mediterranean environment, to create romantic gardens and secret gardens.”

“In the past, soil was viewed as distasteful,” observes landscaper **Kathryn Mathewson**. “That's why people hid it with ivy and juniper and lawns. Now we want natural gardens where the plants work for the space. You don't have to manipulate and control them.”

Where the goal of landscaping was once a tidy neighborhood full of uniform yards – “trying to conquer nature instead of embracing it,” as avid gardener and landscape student Kristin Davis of Menlo Park puts it – homeowners are beginning to look toward settings that connect them to the natural surroundings and to their inner selves.

“We try to use gardens as a healing experience,” explains Rebecca Dye, who co-owns Saratoga's Design Focus with her husband, Hank Helbush. “We try to give them a spirit, make them more than something to look at. We like to think of it as having a stewardship of your land, being a partner with nature. It's a new approach but also an ancient approach, because that's what the Indians did, working as co-creators with nature.”

Mathewson, national president of the landscape division of the American Nursery and Landscape Association and owner of Secret Gardens in San Jose and San Francisco, issued a challenge nearly 10 years ago to the design establishment's no-frills landscaping aesthetic. In a December 1988 article in the magazine American Horticulturist, she attributed the dominant school to the Bauhaus or International Style, familiar to most of

us as the inspiration for the stark high-rise blocks of concrete and glass that, in the view of many, blight urban centers nationwide.

The style was born in the 1920s Germany from a socialist philosophy disdaining the adornments that bespoke aristocracy, her article explained. The movement called for replacing ornamentation with mass-produced industrial materials. Dictated by a powerful cadre of architects and designers, the style took hold throughout America, reaching from the World Trade Center to your front yard.

Mathewson called for returning to a reverence for craftsmanship and an awareness of nature, an appreciation of “individual differences” and “emotional needs.” When she wrote the article, **Mathewson** says now, hers was a lonely voice.

Dig those curves

For those who find themselves stewards of a heavy-handed landscaping job, it all sounds very nice, this recapturing of nature’s spirit and the rediscovered joy of soothing curves and calming sounds. But where does a homeowner looking at a yard full of juniper and squared-off pittosporum actually start?

Brenzel, editor of the Sunset “Western Garden Book” and Western Landscaping Book” (both from Sunset Publishing, \$29.95 each) and senior garden editor of Sunset Magazine, offers ideas for taking the first steps.

The best way to give a 30-year-old lawn some character is to give it a curved edge,” she begins. “Take a spade and dig up some sod, plant some perennials in the new curves.

If I moved into a 60s house with one of those blah yards,” she adds, “along with the curving lawn, I’d plant some colorful flowers and look for accessories. I’d find a great garden bench and scatter canvas pillows in sherbet colors on it in the summer. I’d add a bit of art – sundials, a birdbath, water in the garden such as a simple wall fountain.”

But don’t move too fast. “When you move into a new house and you’ve got this old garden, it’s a good idea to live with it for a while and figure out what you want to replace. Then redo it in stages.”

The transformation in landscaping tastes begins with the entry, where once the visitor marched to the front door up a straight concrete strip from the sidewalk -- or, even more in keeping with the auto-worshipping times, directly from the driveway. “The guest was not honored was not allowed to have a sense of where he was going,” **Mathewson** says.

Now she says, people want landscaping and architecture that make an entrance.

Her renovation of one Palo Alto home gave a neighborly new spirit to the front yard, **Mathewson** says. The overhaul got rid of a shallow brick planter along the front of the house, widened the planting area, curved the walkway and enlarged the stoop for a

friendlier entry. Where straight lines of hedge and lawn had dominated, flower beds and a white picket fence were installed.

While the homeowner is at work in the yard, the picket fence invites passers-by to stop and chat. “She’s enclosed and protected and in her own space, but somehow people feel like they can talk to her,” **Mathewson** says. “It’s a really interesting social process. It’s a really good thing for creating neighborliness.”

The remodel also played down the car’s presence. The driveway was disguised with brick and turned into an extension of the back patio, though the car still passes over it on the way into the garage. “You can’t tell it’s a driveway,” says the homeowner, Ellen Turbow. “That was one of the uses of space that I thought was the most successful. The garage itself looks like a little cottage now.”

San Jose landscaper Mattison Fitzgerald similarly diminished the car’s influence in a Los Altos property she renovated. “From the front, all you could see was a 6-foot redwood fence and a three-car driveway. It was really industrial-looking.” The homeowner, a single man, needed parking for only one car, so expanding the garden into much of the parking area was a natural solution.

The home, on a county road with no sidewalk, was also fronted by a gravel parking strip along the road, though it lies on a curve where parking is unsafe. Extending the garden all the way out to the street both improved the aesthetics and discouraged hazardous parking, Fitzgerald says.

Nurturing nature

More emphasis on plantings and less on cars reflects the new focus on celebrating nature -- which means respecting the surrounding environment. “What a natural garden is depends on where it is,” Brenzel notes. “A natural garden on the edge of a marsh in Monterey will be completely different from a natural garden in the foothills of East San Jose, where the terrain is oak scrubland, or Los Gatos, with the conifer influence.”

“I stress that people start out by being watchful,” says Rebecca Dye. “Look at what’s growing in your environment, what plants are doing well and where they’re content.” In one property in the Alum Rock area of San Jose, she uprooted 200 juniper bushes, leaving two mature oaks and putting in plants that fit into their environment, along with a big boulder. “Right away, a family of quail moved in,” she says happily.

Wildlife on a large scale was attracted when she built a three-acre pond at a grander private home. “Two kinds of dragonflies showed up, osprey, migrating ducks, great blue heron and crayfish.” Boulders are a trademark element for her firm -- purchased from a rock farmer near Oakdale, preferably still caressed by lichens and mosses, and painstakingly transported by flatbed truck.

Even the swimming pool, that sub-urban mark of success, has evolved. Traditional pools, while nice for recreation, tend to make landscapers grimace. “People don’t want that big turquoise rectangle in the garden anymore,” Brenzel says. Homeowners who want pools now, Brenzel says, are forgoing the fitness benefits of a lap-swimming facility and turning to a form that fits into the landscape – “something edged with boulders, with maybe a waterfall cascading into it.”

That cascading waterfall creates an effect that many property owners are seeking: a serene sound to soothe the stress of hectic lives and drown out environmental noise. On a smaller, less costly scale, people are installing fountains -- a current Saratoga project of Fitzgerald’s, on a site that’s plagued by freeway noise, will have four or five.

Other kinds of art objects and accessories are bedecking yards as landscaping becomes more individualized. In the Los Altos home where Mattison Fitzgerald shrank the three-car driveway, she responded to the homeowner’s dream of a Malibu atmosphere with mosaic elements in peach, burgundy and purple Santa Cruz glass, offset by wrought iron.

Fitzgerald has used black stone triangles as a design element for a client who likes the clean modern look – the International Style updated and personalized – and she is working with a homeowner on a garden chess board.

“I’ve never seen more outdoor accessories than I’m seeing right now. Garden art has been mainstreamed,” says Sunset’s Brenzel. “You could start with a single great teak English-style bench or an iron sculpture shaped like a giant leaf. Something like a Tuscan pot planted with herbs and tucked into a perennial border becomes a sculpture.”

Of course, there’s no rule that a landscape has to be unique to evoke meaning. To some tastes, the clean simplicity of the International Style creates its own harmony, and the uniformity of a community full of similar yards can create a connection with the world.

Mathewson describes one landscape she redid some years ago for a Stanford couple, she an artist and he a prominent biochemist. The yard’s 1960s style fit the taste of the husband, with his left-brained, scientific orientation, but jarred the wife’s aesthetic sensibilities. **Mathewson** retained the husband’s style in part of the yard, but created a romantic woodland garden as well. At parties on the renovated property, she relates, the couple’s technically minded friends gravitate to the linear portions of the landscape, while the artists congregate in the woodland sections.

While the redesign for those clients respected the husband’s orientation toward controlled angularity, **Mathewson** sensed that people who use the outdoors without appreciating its natural elements are losing out on something. “A garden brings you something that nothing else can,” she says. “It makes you look at the seasons of life and the seasons of the land.”

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