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GARDENS

I L L U S T R A T E D

OPEN TO NATURE

Californian landscape architect Scott Lewis has created an informal garden, open to the landscape, for two wildlife-loving artists

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PHOTOGRAPHS MARION BRENNER AND DAVID WAKELY

The brief

It's not often that a landscape architect gets to influence the placing of a new house, but that is what happened on this project in the Portola Valley in the San Francisco Bay Area. Scott Lewis, of Scott Lewis Landscape Architecture, was able to collaborate with Turnbull Griffin Haesloop Architects on moving three proposed interconnecting buildings six metres to the north. This created more garden space on the south side, and allowed the garden to wrap around the property and frame views to the west. It also allowed for a potting shed and preserved an *Arctostaphylos manzanita* grove.

The clients are artists and keen gardeners who wanted an informal garden that would blend into the surrounding landscape, known as oak chaparral. They also wanted to welcome wildlife – to the extent that they did not want boundaries. They requested native, drought-tolerant plants and an attractive way to showcase their succulent collection. A green roof and water harvesting and storage had already been incorporated to the house design, and the conservation of resources on the property was paramount.

The design

Scott proposed a “designed landscape” that would blend with the oak preserve beyond, using native and drought-tolerant plants and minimal hard landscaping. He also added a further requirement. Tall California redwoods were shading the site, blocking the view and showing signs of stress. “Redwoods don't grow naturally on these hillsides,” he explains. “Their preferred environment is on the coast, where there's ambient moisture from the fog. With climate change, the redwoods that were planted 30, 40 or 50 years ago in this area are getting stressed without irrigation. We decided to replace them with something more see-through and a better habitat for flora and fauna.”

The project was an enjoyable collaboration between Scott and his team, the clients and the architects, and in 2022 it won an American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) award. “There's no lawn, but this is a good model for how to work in this climate to create a very beautiful look,” Scott says.

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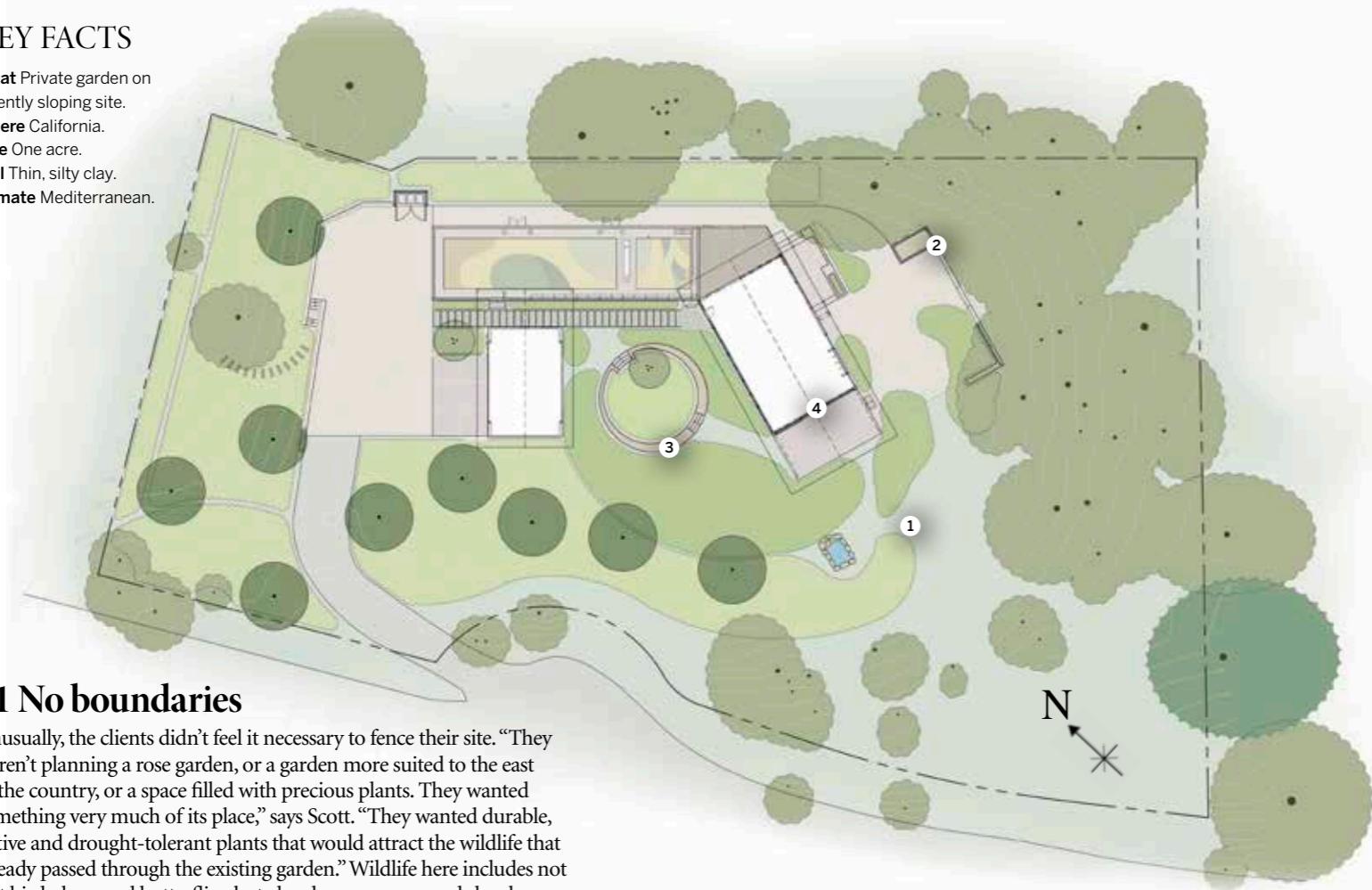
Left The new house is made up of three interconnected buildings, including studios for the artist owners. They wrap around a stone circle housing a collection of succulents, mixed with colourful plants that include the state flower, *Eschscholzia californica*.



A designed landscape

KEY FACTS

What Private garden on a gently sloping site.
Where California.
Size One acre.
Soil Thin, silty clay.
Climate Mediterranean.



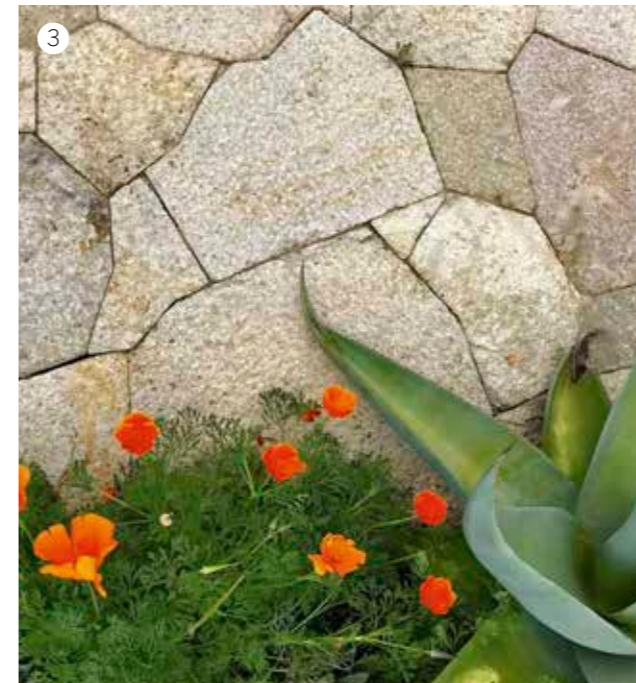
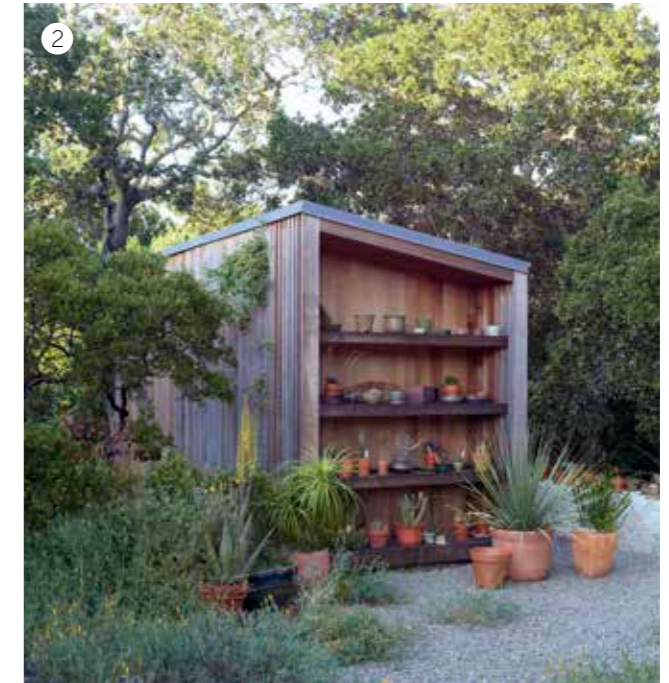
1 No boundaries

Unusually, the clients didn't feel it necessary to fence their site. "They weren't planning a rose garden, or a garden more suited to the east of the country, or a space filled with precious plants. They wanted something very much of its place," says Scott. "They wanted durable, native and drought-tolerant plants that would attract the wildlife that already passed through the existing garden." Wildlife here includes not just birds, bees and butterflies, but also deer, raccoons and skunks.



2 Potting shed

Designed by the architects, the Western red cedar building echoes the house. The outdoor shelving displays plants, while the interior is for potting and storage. Nearby, a mazanita tree (*Arctostaphylos manzanita*) with beautiful, contorted cinnamon bark is framed against an exterior wall of the shed. This area is surrounded by gravel to allow for experimentation with new plant cultivars. Beyond, a culinary garden and outdoor grill are incorporated in a cast concrete terrace off the kitchen.



3 Stonework

Rough-hewn stone walls define the edges of the space, evoking the natural rock outcrops on the site. These were made of tufa limestone, the preferred material of the sculptor and stonemason Edwin Hamilton. "It can be cut very tightly and has an interesting texture," says Scott. Edwin assembled the raised circular bed that houses succulents and the L-shaped seat wall near the potting shed in his workshop, numbering each piece on the back so it could be reassembled on site. He then added texture to the surface by using a blunt chisel.

4 Hard landscaping

There is limited hard landscaping the garden. The terrace outside the main living area is simply a single slab of cast concrete that flows from the house. Almost all of the paths and surfaces are surfaced with a grey pea gravel. The owners did not want any edging around the borders for a more informal look, and also wanted to be able to move plants around. "We brought in some soil, but mostly, the existing soil was decompacted so that it became friable again," explains Scott. "The paths were tamped down so that the soil was as firm as possible and gravel was then put on top."



Turn the page for planting ideas



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The planting

1 Succulent circle

The owner had collected a range of succulents that she wanted to consolidate, now housed within the tufa stone circle. “They now look like a giant table arrangement from inside the house.” The owner supervised the planting, and Scott’s team added fillers and trailing plants that drape down the side and give a little softness to the walls.

2 Native plants

The property uses a grey water and rainwater harvesting system as a source of irrigation, devised in conjunction with a water management company. The key to water saving on this project, however, was the plant selection. “Native plants don’t need much irrigation,” explains Scott. “California normally gets its rain in the winter, between November and March, and that’s what they’re adapted to. We have no rain between April and October, but native plants don’t need water in summer, as they go dormant or lose their leaves. That said, our recent dry winters means there’s an increasing need for irrigation then.”

Scott used a handful of plant groups, including salvias, grasses and ceanothus. “Within those, different species and varieties add layers and beauty.” Large Cleveland salvias (*Salvia clevelandii*) are a key plant as they are big, bold and weed-smothering. “They have a strong, musky scent and I’ve grown to love them more than lavender.” The native deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*), which has tall flower spikes, is another key plant – “Despite its name, deer don’t eat it” – alongside the state plant, California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*), which self-seeds freely. Ten new live oaks



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were added and California pipevine (*Aristolochia californica*) trails in the trees’ understorey. Scott also used a handful of drought-tolerant, non-native plants, including *Salvia x jamensis* (sometimes sold as *Salvia greggii*), which is native to Texas and Mexico and comes in a wide range of colours.

“Having lived on the site for around ten years, the clients were familiar with the wildlife that passed through – primarily deer,” says Scott. “You can manage that if you have a palette of plants that might be nibbled occasionally, while the real food sources are elsewhere.” The clients already had a handle on what deer eat, so the garden has suffered only a few losses. “Deer ate a native redbud that we planted at the back of the house, but ignored one at the front.” Scott and the clients selected almost 40 native, drought-tolerant plants, planted in bold drifts, that would appeal to the birds, bees and butterflies of the adjoining nature reserve.

3 Green roof

On top of the studio’s flat roof Scott created a meadow garden using eight different grasses, plus native wildflowers and bulbs that were chosen in collaboration with the clients and US grass expert John Greenlee. Providing interest throughout the year, it also helps to merge buildings with garden, and with the landscape beyond. It is planted using a tray system, with a 22cm depth at its deepest point to accommodate grasses. The plants, mostly plugs and small plants in 9cm pots, were laid out on site, for an organic look. The shortest plants are near the deck in front of the bedroom, while the tallest grasses are at the end farthest from the house. Drip irrigation is used in summer, when the temperatures are typically above 30°C. “The plants are always green, for the visual effect but also for fire safety,” explains Scott.

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Scott Lewis Landscape Architecture at sllasf.com