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The key to enlarging this oceanfront garden was understanding the challenging site. It was all downhill from there.

By Emily Young

Just Bluffing
Carved into reaches, a the scene for with friends
the garden's new lower spacious terrace sets alfresco meals and family.

F or Lisa Gimmy, renovating a backyard garden in Corona del Mar seemed like a landscape architect's dream. The clients had impeccable taste and a budget that wouldn't shackle the design. And the location was drop-dead gorgeous, with an unobstructed view of the Pacific Ocean stretching into the distance. But the renovation proved to be part nightmare, too.

The three-quarter-acre lot was 75 peninsous feet above the beach. And it was situated atop a steadily eroding blufftop that hadn't been developed beyond a modest patio and lawn in 1964.

So when Gimmy's clients asked her to create more vantage points where they could entertain outdoors and enjoy the sight and sound of the breaking waves, it was up to Gimmy to transform the steep, craggy slope into usable space without undermining the stability of the entire site.

But Gimmy—a Santa Monica-based landscape architect who also teaches at the University of Southern California—and the eclectic crew of experts she assembled did their homework well. After only six months of planning and six months of construction, she unveiled a revel revealing sculptural planters and handsome stone paths that invite exploration below the bluff's edge. Carved into the garden's new lower reaches, a spacious terrace sets the scene for alfresco meals with friends and family, while a small seating area encourages more contemplative pursuits.

Throughout the project, the clients' request for a landscape that "looked like it had always been here" guided the overall design. "We were looking for something rugged and organic, something that looked as if it belonged," Gimmy explains. That led her to work with, rather than against, the lay of the land. Natural indentations suggested where the terraces should go, she says, so "once we found that we could follow the existing topography, things sort of fell into place."

Gimmy also took cues from the property's modernist house, a two-story brick and redwood structure by Los Angeles architect Carl Masting. The landscape around it needed updating, but because the home's front and rear walls of glass were oriented to capture the stunning vistas, the clients didn't want to simply "plow everything under and start from scratch." Instead, they insisted on keeping two gnarled mescalote trees and a lone Torrey pine as mature framing devices and supplementing them with bird-of-paradise and a host of native and drought-tolerant plants.

Before she ever sat down at her drafting board, though, Gimmy first conducted a thorough evaluation of the location. Looking for signs of past and potential erosion that might threaten the site,

LISA GIMMY expanded the small backyard with lower terraces that follow the natural contours of the bluff (left).
We were looking for something rugged and organic, something that looked as if it belonged.

Since the walls needed to be as light and porous as possible, they were built dry stacked and low to the ground, with only enough mortar to secure the capstones. In all, nearly 40 tons of stone from Boulder Bros. Building Materials in Santa Monica were hauled in. “We couldn’t bring heavy equipment out onto the site, so we had to employ some Egyptian tactics,” Burch recalls. “We rolled some of the stone on log millers with sheer manpower.”

Pitched back slightly into the earth for support, the retaining walls form a cozy niche protected from gusty coastal winds. They also lend themselves to up-close viewing of dainty, jewel-like plants such as snow-in-summer, saland-choe, echinacea, and other succulents. Rounding out other beds are kangaroo paws, tree aloes, and ceanothus ‘Carmel Creeping.’ Virtually every plant has a separate bubbler head for intermittent irrigation that maximizes saturation but minimizes wasteful runoff and evaporation. Spray heads were restricted to the turf next to the house.

Farther down the slope, another flight of steps leads to a more intimate terrace about 15 feet below the lawn. Here, where the clients can enjoy a glass of wine at sundown, ceanothus ‘Julia Phelps,’ pink melaleuca, and agaves were cultivar-ed sparingly. “We were careful not to plant much on the lowest terrace because that was the weakest spot,” Major says. “The eucalyptus that were there already had roots that were expanding and pulling apart the rock and accelerating the erosion process.” In fact, two of the trees have since been removed to halt further damage.

The clients originally hired Gimmy to revamp only the backyard, but they eventually had her improve the front and side gardens as well. Out front, she preserved the Coastal Commission. Once the proposal mer commodation requirements for properly channeling water across the site and no building too close to the edge, Gimmy and her crew were ready to break ground.

The old patio and lawn on the top level of the garden remain configured much as they were before, but with a few subtle differences. The clients had already replaced outdated avocado-green patio tiles with Chinese slate tiles in earthy gray and rust tones. To extend that color scheme into the landscape, Gimmy ripped out concrete walkways and substituted rough-hewn, orange-tinged Monterey flagstone paths set within California quartzite borders. Since Maxon had designed the house without gutters, years of rain had been allowed to fall from the double-height roof directly to the ground, contributing to a gradual wearing away of the bluffslop. “To control the amount and force of the water,” Major says, “we installed a submain system along the edge of the turf and further collecting water from the roof and carry it to the beach.” The buried drains funnel water into a pipe that runs down the slope—hidden in the vegetation—and dissipates the flow before it empties below.

The clients found the original garden’s small patch of grass useless as a
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(Continued from Page 75) canopy of old Italian stone pines and an espaliered coral tree in the motor court and entrance courtyard. Next to existing Hollywood junipers and Hawaiian tree ferns, she created a lush understory of New Zealand Christmas trees, banded bromeliads, spotted ligularia, hymenocallis, clivia, and more agaves and bird-of-paradise.

Along the side of the house, Gimmy removed a tall hedge to open up large windows to the sun, then brought in shorter spathiphyllum, which thrives in the shade of the house next door. To block out the neighbors, she planted a screen of dense focus along the fence. And for continuity’s sake, she replaced a narrow concrete walk with the same flagstone pavers installed elsewhere.

It’s the rear slope, however, that will always be the main attraction of this project. And nearly eight years after Gimmy finished it in 1993, the oceanfront garden continues to win praise. Two years ago, the Southern California chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects recognized it with an award of merit for residential design. “Scale was important, especially since we were competing against such a spectacular setting,” Gimmy says. “It was critical not to do anything that would be perceived as too small or fussy.” As it turns out, she needn’t have worried. According to the clients, they got exactly what they were looking for—“a garden that looks as if God had put it there.”

Emily Young, a former senior editor at Los Angeles Times Magazine, writes about landscape design, architecture, and interior design.

PROJECT CREDITS

Landscape architect: Lisa Gimmy, Lisa Gimmy Landscape Architecture, Santa Monica, California.

Landscape design consultant and arborist: Michael Major, The Office of Michael Major, Laguna Beach, California.

Softscape contractor: Steven Volski, Steven Z. Volski and Associates, La Habra Heights, California.

Hardscape contractor: Brian Burch, BAM Construction, Huntington Beach, California.

Stone supplier: Bourget Bros. Building Materials, Santa Monica, California.