



The classic California ranch-style house has an offset “front” door that’s approached from the side, via the driveway. This architecture benefits from a garden that helps visitors find their way to the home’s entrance, notes landscape architect Puck Erickson-Lohnas, who worked with homeowners Mari and Hank Mitchel to create their garden. Here a white fence covered in ‘Cecile Brunner’ roses signals a welcome. Limbing up the trees allowed a sightline to the entry porch. The cool colors and soft textures of the ground-level plantings preview those repeated in other garden spaces beyond the entry.



A Brighter VIEW

DISASTER PROMPTED THEM TO MOVE HOMES,
BUT THE NEW GARDEN PROVED VITAL TO THEIR HEALING

BY MEGHAN SHINN PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACK COYIER

Mari and Hank Mitchel loved their garden in Montecito, Calif. Mari collaborated with a good friend and fellow member of The Garden Club of Santa Barbara, landscape architect Puck Erickson-Lohnas, to create the space, which she describes as “fairylike”—an enchanting space that opened to the street and delighted the neighborhood children. But disaster suddenly struck.

“We had just planned to take photos of the garden and it was gone overnight,” recalls Puck. In the pre-dawn hours of January 9, 2018, a mudslide flowing 15 feet deep washed through Montecito, killing 23 people, injuring scores of others and destroying more than 100 homes, including

that of the Mitchels. After being buried and dragged by the debris, they waited for rescue in hip-deep mud. Hundreds of other homes were badly damaged in the disaster.

In the aftermath, Mari and Hank knew they would not rebuild on that site, but they wanted to remain in Santa Barbara. Ultimately they found a property in Hope Ranch, a Santa Barbara residential community noted for its knolls and oak canopy. This area was indeed once a working ranch. In the 1920s it was divided into residential lots, with developers taking care to make the them irregular and respectful of the land’s contours and character. As a result, Hope Ranch is rife with settings and backdrops that offer pure delight to gardeners.

MEGHAN SHINN is *Horticulture*’s editor. JACK COYIER photographed the Mitchel garden in spring 2022.



Stepping from the driveway into the entry garden reveals low plantings of ornamental grasses and flowering perennials, such as purple Mexican bush sage (*Salvia leucantha*). Clumps of silver-leaved white sage (*S. apiana*) beckon visitors to continue along the winding path to the white-gated hedge that borders the side-yard garden. White sage is a rugged, highly drought-tolerant native of Southern California's coastal sage-scrub habitat, where it supports many kinds of wildlife. It is also treasured by Southern California's indigenous people for its healing properties. Puck included it as a reminder of resilience for the Mitchels, who had to cope with the sudden destruction of their previous home and garden.



The New Space

The home purchased by the Mitchels sits on a knoll. Monterey cypress frame a view toward the Santa Ynez mountains. The two-acre property hosted a neat but bland mix of lawn, boxwood and 'Iceberg' roses when the couple moved in.

"It was lovely but predictable," remembers Puck, who was eager to help her friends begin gardening again after the trauma of the debris flow. "The plants were not responsive to the changes in our climate. Mari wanted to create something more drought tolerant and resilient."

Mari welcomed Puck's input: "I love her style, which is really identifiable. Very 'Puck,'" she explains. Puck is a founding principal at Arcadia Studio, a firm known for its collaborative processes and plant-centric approach to design.

"Puck's style meets my own preference for the beauty and softness of an English garden, but without the dependency on water, which of course we don't have," Mari says. "She's very good at putting in plants and details that honor a place and its eco-

system." That emphasis is also espoused by the Garden Club of America and its member groups, including the Santa Barbara chapter where the two women bonded, she notes.

"Garden Clubs have evolved to do the important work of conservation and regeneration," she says. "It's about honoring the land."

Design Challenges

While the Mitchels' new property provided great opportunities with its views and blank slate, it also came with several challenges for the designer. The house is a traditional California ranch—long and low, with the front door that is off-center and approached from the side. This necessitated a front garden that would highlight the entry, making it more of an obvious destination from the driveway.

The shape of the house, along with its ridgetop position, also creates a "bowling alley effect in both the front and back yards," says Puck. That is, the spaces feel long and narrow, bounded as they are by the ranch-style home and the property's slope. Puck



needed to create depth and distinct spaces within these obvious rectangles.

Her admiration for British design pioneer Gertrude Jekyll helped. Jekyll is remembered for laying out a strong geometry in the garden, but blurring it with softer, naturalistic designs inside the lines of the beds. The Mitchel garden benefits from an “underlying architecture,” notes Puck. “Any garden has to be organized with ‘good bones’ so that it doesn’t read as chaos; but still, this is not a garden with its geometry revealed.”

The property is larger than the previous garden, and although the actual landscaped garden is not huge, Mari is a plant lover and wanted the space filled.

“So, we had the challenge of any plant lover,” says Puck. “How do you include a lot of plants that you love, but make sure it doesn’t look like, well—frankly, my own garden! Which is not designed, because I don’t have time, and I’m always trying plants out.”

Journeying Through

To meet the property’s design challenges—particularly those of shape and size—Puck



This sheltered spot lies just within the gated hedge that borders the entry garden. It wraps around the bedroom wing of the house, leading to the back yard. It is a serene, private area that affords quiet contemplation among calming greens, grays and blues. A patch of Angel Wings senecio breaks up the fine texture of the catmint lining the path. This space encourages deep reflection thanks to a pair of meaningful ornaments. One is a blue pot salvaged from the Mitchels’ previous garden; filled with helichrysum, it nestles amid frothy *Westringia* ‘Morning Light’, with a backdrop of *Arctostaphylos* ‘Pacific Mist’ and purple-blooming *Salvia* ‘Waverly’. The other special item is the potted *Aloe lukeana* adjacent the chairs. This specimen was given to Mari Mitchel by her friend Tom Cole, a plant explorer and aloe expert. Cole discovered the species in Uganda and named it for his brother Luke, an environmental-justice leader who died in a car accident while working in that country.



The back of the house faces east and slopes down from a rectilinear space that echoes the long, lean shape of the building. Puck conquered the “bowling alley” feel of the space with snaking paths, rounded plants and strategic elements that provide depth. These include the rose arbor and the turquoise fountain (far left) that sits adjacent an outdoor-dining patio. Agave and yucca provide strong and spiky contrast among the border’s soft, small-leaved, mounding perennials. Puck explains that in this region’s dry climate, many beloved perennials start to decline after about five years. “We plan for that, with species interspersed to maintain interest through the different cycles,” she says of the overall scheme.



**There is something
infinitely healing
in the repeated
refrains of nature —
the assurance that
dawn comes after
night, and spring
after winter.**

— RACHEL CARSON



followed an overall strategy of “creating different spaces, so as you move through the garden you continually feel like you’re in a new place.”

The garden begins along the climbing, winding driveway, which is flanked with old cypress, pines and oaks. The trees were underplanted with ground-covering California lilacs (*Ceanothus griseus* var. *horizontalis* ‘Yankee Point’) and agave. At the top of the driveway a low, white fence, covered in ‘Cecile Brunner’ roses, marks the edge of an entry garden leading to the front door.

Stepping through a gate in the fence opens a view of the entry garden’s soft-textured, cool-hued perennials, including white Australian fuchsia (*Correa* ‘Ivory Bells’), Mexican bush sage (*Salvia leucantha*) and several kinds of ornamental grasses. Puck also included white sage (*Salvia apiana*), an upright, mounding subshrub with silvery leaves, “for color and to remind us of our resilience.” This Southern California native plant is an important food source for bees, butterflies and hummingbirds, and it is treasured by the area’s indigenous people for its healing properties.

A path within the entry garden leads to a hedge with a gate that gives passage to the next garden space, which wraps around the home’s bedroom wing. This area introduces a feeling of privacy and shelter, in contrast to the open ambiance of the entry garden. Fruitless olive trees and ‘Skyrocket’ juniper (*Juniperus scopularium* ‘Skyrocket’) accent low plantings of Mediterranean and native perennials and subshrubs like coast rosemary (*Westringia mundi* and *W.* ‘Morning Light’), catmint (*Nepeta*), manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* ‘Pacific Mist’) and *Salvia* ‘Waverly’. Puck interspersed Angel Wings senecio (*Senecio candicans* ‘Senaw’) because its bright silver, wavy, broad foliage provides textural contrast amid the Mediterranean and native perennials.

“So many drought-tolerant plants have little leaves that, together, look like a hairball,” she explains to note large-leaved succulents’ important role within herbaceous plantings.

The path through this side garden leads into the rear garden, with a view opening to rolling hills. Despite its long, narrow



A path that runs parallel to the rose arbor terminates in a shadowy blue ornament. Terracotta-potted citrus and dwarf olives are a nod to the local climate's namesake—the Mediterranean. Reaching the end of this path, the visitor can look down to an infinity pool tucked into the slope or out across hillside views framed by aged Monterey cypress.



shape, the back yard offers unique areas to enjoy. Potted citrus, such as kumquats and lemons, surround a spa, providing lovely fragrance when they bloom. Nearby, a small rose garden nurtures cultivars that Mari worked with a local rosarian to choose. The rose garden includes an arbor, which Puck points out as invaluable in breaking up the alley-like space. It frames borrowed scenery beyond the property and serves as a reference point from different points in the garden, for a sense of changing depth.

A bubbling fountain at the edge of the dining terrace does the same trick. Like the arbor, it's a detail sited to catch the eye from spots along the path that winds through the

perennial garden. Plantings here include dwarf olives, germander (*Teucrium fruticans*), *Kalanchoe* 'Oak Leaf', *Salvia* 'Marine Blue' and Jerusalem sage (*Phlomis fruticosa*), with agaves and yuccas accenting these plants' mounded forms and soft texture.

Garden of Solace

The textures weaving the garden spaces together are among Mari's favorite aspects of the design. Combined with the soft color palette, these textures lend a sense of comfort, such that the Mitchels' adult son once described the garden "as giving you a hug."

"I love a pop of complementary color, like the persimmon color of a potted abutilon



and the apricot hued roses, but I don't want too much," Mari says. "In this bright, sunny climate, I prefer colors that make things feel cool. After what we survived, we needed this garden to be a place of solace." Gentle silvers, blues and purples fit the bill and add to the calming spirit of the garden, which Mari says has helped heal the family. Noticing how the flowers draw bees and birds has been especially heartening.

"There's a lot of life in this garden; the old boxwood and turf was just a yard with little birdsong or the hum of pollinators," she says. "Our garden is a home for them and for us to share with them. We are grateful for this healing space." ❧



The Mitchels can enjoy sunrises and a view of the rose garden from the patio, with music supplied by a bubbling water feature. Mari mostly prefers cool colors, like that of the *Salvia* 'Marine Blue' catching the morning light, but she also loves the apricots and pinks of the roses that a local rosarian helped her choose to suit the climate.