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The Conscious Gardener

Designer Patricia Benner Takes A Thoughtful Approach To California Landscapes

BY KERSTIN CZARRA | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KARYN MILLET

BEHIND EACH OF LOS ANGELES-BASED designer Patricia Benner's gardens, is a complex balance of beauty, sensibility, and sustainability. A second-generation landscape designer born and raised on the East Coast, she has honed her own distinctive California aesthetic for nearly two decades. "I strive to create spaces that have an organic connection to their setting and feel like they've always been there," she says. Her portfolio is filled with designs that reflect a sense of history alongside modern, lived-in luxury. With an affinity for the rolling green vistas of



ABOVE A wood arbor was moved from another location on the property and is now a focal point on the lawless allee of holly oak trees. The landscape designer Patricia Benner. Portrait by Stephen Busken



ABOVE A lush Magnolia grandiflora frames the front door of the Hancock Park home.

Gardens

the mid-Atlantic and New England, she blends this classism with the natural beauty of California's dry landscapes and subtle seasons. For a Montecito garden, Benner nestled construction into existing trees, used indigenous stone for hardscaping and native plants to respect an Oak woodland.

A sense of respect and mindfulness came into play for another recent project at a home in the historic Windsor Square enclave in Hancock Park. The designer created the look of a Parisian park with a lawnless allée—a standout amongst the neighborhood's wide, lush lawns. Grass was replaced with symmetrical rows of evergreen and drought-tolerant holly oak trees whose rich, continuous evergreen canopies provide a sense of lushness and shade. The trees are planted on a field of decomposed granite, a hallmark of the romantic and classically proportioned gardens found in Europe.

The design is a response to the homeowner's desire for style, sustainability, and safe social interaction, a direction she is seeing many of her clients move in right now. "While City planning departments throughout California are leading the way in requiring sustainable landscapes for new construction," says Benner. "Clients themselves are increasingly attuned to issues of sustainability and design of drought-tolerant, water-wise landscapes." And with the increased time spent at home in the era of COVID, people now consider their private outdoor spaces a place of refuge. "Front gardens are seen as a buffer between public spaces and private sanctuary where you can see and interact with friends and neighbors and still maintain a social distance," she says.

Next up for Benner are some projects in Northern California, where she has a home and recently opened an office to serve clients in and around San Francisco, Napa, Sonoma, and Marin. While the areas share some characteristics with their neighbors in Southern California, Benner is excited to experiment in a region with cooler temperatures and more discernible seasons. "The plant palette of northern California is somewhat different from that of south," she says. "I am excited to grow some of my favorite East Coast plants, and use my Stinson Beach garden as a lab for experimenting." CH



LEFT A hedge separates the front yard allée from a private seating area with cozy fire pit, custom made of block with bluestone veneer. The graceful lounge chairs are by Munder Skiles. A *Beaumontia grandiflora* vine was planted in the foreground left in addition to the *Cocculus* tree and salvias and Blue Lily Turf in a nearby bed.

OPPOSITE Munder Skiles's Amongington bench is a shady spot to relax thanks to a graceful *Sycamore* tree. Bluestone pavers echo the lines of the seating.