



MODERN MISSION

On a former pear orchard in Sonoma, California, a new home's courtyard walls keep the wild at bay—and hide a refreshing garden oasis inside.

By Pam Penick
Photography by Marion Brenner

The entry area gives no hint of the lush garden on the other side of the white stucco wall. Here, an array of mostly Australian plants—including 'Orange Cross' kangaroo paw, grassy lomandra, and eucalyptus—thrives with little irrigation while adding feathery texture and rich color. The loose planting style is constrained by straight steel edging and linear paths. The sphere is rolled-up barbed wire from an old fence on the property, a memento of the land's former life.

WHEN MARILYN STOCKE and her husband, Roland, purchased some 6 acres of farmland in the wine country of Sonoma, California, in 1999, most of the property's pear orchard had succumbed to neglect and fireblight, and a deep tangle of brush and poison oak entwined with native oaks and eucalyptus rendered half the land inaccessible. The Stoces had intended to build a country home there but didn't know where to begin. "It was daunting," Marilyn says. For 11 years they didn't build anything, but remained in Sausalito and just visited the property on weekends.

Eventually, Marilyn took on the project. She hired residential designer George Bevan of Bevan & Associates and also hired Healdsburg-based landscape architect Mike Lucas to fulfill a single request: to build a sheltering wall. "At the time, I did not understand how a landscape architect could transform a piece of land and create an environment for living," Marilyn says. "But Mike saw what this could be."

"The property looked like the Wild West," Lucas says of his first visit. "It was tumbleweed city with coyote brush and barbed wire. But Marilyn struck me as a pioneering sort." Together with the designer, they devised a "modern mission" concept for the design of the house and walled courtyard—a nod to Sonoma's Mission San Francisco Solano, the northernmost and last Spanish mission in California. "Those old buildings are spare and beautiful," Lucas says. "They're also walled fortresses that keep the wild at bay."

Lucas constructed white stucco walls to block the wind and separate the Wild West landscape from a cultivated courtyard garden, which he planted with an allée of ornamental fruit trees as well as fragrant flowering plants like star jasmine, roses, Japanese mock orange, fragrant olive, and sweet box. Boston ivy cloaks the stark white walls, and agapanthus sends up blue sparklerlike flowers that last nearly all summer. Planting blocks of relatively few types of plants—many

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A stucco wall cloaked in Boston ivy encloses the 4,500-square-foot courtyard garden. In this section a long window cutout, which can be closed with a sliding barn-door-style shutter, frames a view of a blue-gray Weber agave, orange-flowering *Kniphofia*, and 'Mesa Azure' salvia. "A standard 6-foot wall seemed too suburban," says landscape architect Mike Lucas. "So we went 8 feet high and punched windows and doors into it." Stucco also covers the gas fire pit and two benches that extend from the wall; one supports the steel post of a shade arbor, and the other wraps around a raised bed with a 'Mission fig. Yosemite Tan gravel covers the ground.



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of them evergreens—keeps maintenance simpler and ensures the garden remains green year-round.

The garden came as a pleasant surprise to Marilyn, who was so focused on shelter and privacy from the road that she didn't initially have a garden in mind. Nearly every room in the L-shaped house overlooks the courtyard, making the garden the heart of the home. "Being surrounded by greenery and nature gives me pleasure and a sense of peace," Marilyn says.

Outside the walls, by the visitor parking court, a loosely planted, drought-tolerant mix of Australian plants thrives: kangaroo paw, lomandra, bottlebrush, and eucalyptus. These are punctuated by muscular broad-leaved Weber agaves that Lucas brought from his own garden as 8-inch pups (baby agaves that grow at the base of the mother plant) that have grown to around 4 feet tall and wide.

A row of eucalyptus trees shading the road to the house inspired the other Australian plantings. "They're messy trees," Marilyn says, "but Mike convinced me not to cut them down. We love them now and let the trees do their thing. We call them our soldiers." While eucalyptus are not native, Lucas notes that "the trees are part of California history, and they're lovely. A background plant like that creates depth from the road to the house. Plus, they don't take any supplemental water."

Watering the plants has been a challenge from the start. The home's water supply comes from a well and has tested positive for boron, a nutrient that can harm plants at excessive levels. There's often no rain from May to November, so in order to safely irrigate the lush courtyard garden Marilyn trucks in boron-free water and stores it in a cistern connected to her irrigation system. The dry garden outside the courtyard requires less irrigation, and those plants are more tolerant of boron, so with those she switches between using well water and purchased water. "After the house and garden were built in 2013, I got a job that pays for my water bill," Marilyn says with a laugh.

Left: The horizontal lines—in the arbor, courtyard wall, window cutouts, and water trough—give the space depth as well as continuity. A gravel path leads through swaying agapanthus flowers to the dining area and fire pit. Citrus-scented Japanese mook orange "acts as a subtle evergreen divider," Lucas says, "separating the different experiences of the courtyard: arrival foyer and dining." A 'Mission' fig in the corner riffs on the modern mission concept for the house.

Opposite, top: Marilyn sets an iroko wood table by Viteo under a 14- by 20-foot steel-framed arbor topped by cedar slats and shade cloth and strung with café lights. The outdoor wicker chairs are by Point. An 8-foot-wide path leads through an ornamental fruit tree allée to the back of the property.

Opposite, bottom: A raised terrace of acid-washed, buff-tinted concrete wraps the L-shaped house and overlooks the courtyard garden. A 30-foot-long water trough edges the terrace and parallels the straight path from garden gate to front door. "It's a welcoming feature that reflects the sky," Lucas says, and it enhances the sense of a sheltered oasis. Chinese fringetree and other ornamental trees add height without shading out the garden. Tangerine Livin' Easy rose standards peek over a low stucco wall near the door. The outdoor wicker sofa and chairs are by Point.





When closed, a steel-framed wooden door hides the courtyard garden from the parking court, where the orange-flowering kangaroo paw grows. "When you open the door and step into this space, coming from the rugged exterior, you're greeted with this lush, green, fragrant, soothing garden, and the rest of the world sort of falls away," Lucas says. Boston ivy greens the stucco wall, and blue agapanthus blooms reach skyward in summer. A stone scupper on a Fond du Lac limestone-faced water trough spills a recirculating sheet of water into the gravel paving. Star jasmine adds greenery and sweet-scented flowers on either side.

'Orange Cross' kangaroo paw and chartreuse lomandra elaborate on the Australian theme set by eucalyptus trees original to the property. All these plants are tough and need little irrigation, Lucas says. "The lomandra especially looks good year-round. You don't have to cut it back."



Aside from helping keep her water bill lower, the drier exterior garden is a powerful and surprising contrast with the lush, green, and fragrant garden inside the walls. "The first time people enter the courtyard," Marilyn says, "they say, 'Wow!' It's a complete contrast to the outside. It's an oasis."

A long water trough with a scupper fountain runs alongside the gravel path between the garden gate and the front door, reflecting the sky and visually cooling the space on hot days. Horizontal windows in the courtyard walls frame views of the exterior garden (and vice versa when looking in from outside). Marilyn enjoys entertaining

themselves, revealing the trunks of majestic native oaks and stately eucalyptus trees. A path was added that leads all the way to the back of the property and overlooks a neighboring vineyard. Marilyn enjoys exploring this area in all seasons but especially after winter rains, when vernal pools appear and families of ducks move in. She wanted to share it with her guests but found she couldn't entice anyone out of the comfortable courtyard to join her for a promenade around the property. "They'd just want to stay in the courtyard all evening," she says. "Let's go see the back," I'd say, and friends would say, "Do we have to?"

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within the sheltered courtyard. "We hang out under the shade trellis and by the fire pit and make s'mores," she says. "It's an ideal place for entertaining. I love having people over!"

Lucas created views that lead the eye along straight lines through the garden and beyond the house. "We wanted to get views out of the courtyard and into the depth of the property," he says. One sight line runs from the garden's dining area through tall agapanthus, over the water trough and a patio terrace, and through a glass-enclosed breezeway to the golden fields beyond. "That's where we planted around a dozen native valley oaks. We wanted to restore the original splendor to the outside of the courtyard," Lucas says. The other view runs from the fire pit through an ornamental fruit tree allée and out through a covered breezeway, where the allée continues along a wood-chip trail into the semitamed backyard.

When they bought the land, Marilyn says, "the back really was a jungle. We cleaned it up, added oaks and coyote brush, but it was a jungle when we started." Marilyn and Roland hacked out the poison oak and brush

That's when I decided we needed some attractions back there."

Marilyn asked Lucas to implement phase 2: installing focal points along the pathway to draw people deeper into the property. Lucas brought in several unique features, including a manganese rock-crusher bowl being sold for scrap at a local quarry that he turned into a compelling water feature and placed at the end of the ornamental fruit tree allée. Now Marilyn can sometimes entice her guests away from the fire pit for a stroll.

Once overgrown and wild, the former orchard-turned-courtyard-garden reconnects with Sonoma's architectural and agricultural history, thanks to Lucas's thoughtful design. And it's become the country retreat Marilyn and Roland dreamed of years ago. "It's a place of peace," Marilyn says. "I can look out front and see this civilized garden with the ornamental fruit tree allée and ivy growing up the walls, and beyond that I can see vineyards and the Sonoma hills. And if I look out back I see native oaks, wildlife, and our stately eucalyptus. I feel really lucky to live here."



Above, top: Livin' Easy rose standards along the terrace add a colorful note in front of blue agapanthus. Chinese fringetree and Boston ivy on the wall lift the eye to a line of mature eucalyptus trees along the road to the house.

Above, bottom: The barn-door-style shutter on the courtyard wall can block the wind, but when open it frames a long view from the parking court's dry garden into the courtyard, where a fire pit warms chilly evenings. In the foreground, Weber agave spreads spiky leaves amid 'Little Ollie' olives, grassy lomandra, orange-flowering Kniphofia, and tall verbena.