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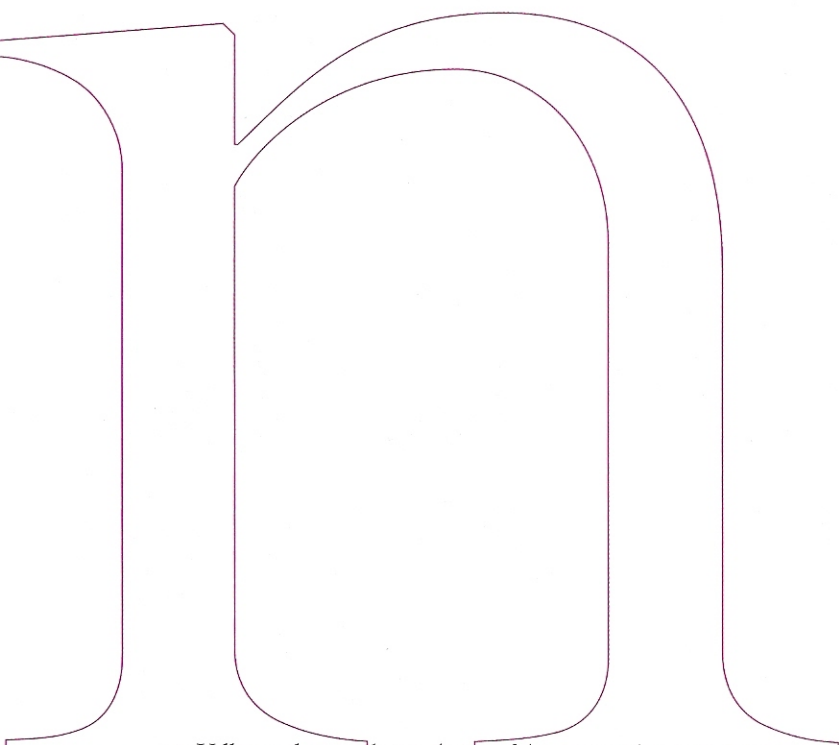
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napa au naturel

A water-wise hilltop garden in Northern California's wine country takes its cues from the native landscape and blurs the boundaries between indoors and out.



apa Valley real estate lures plenty of dreamers who want to re-create a piece of Tuscany or Provence. But for the owners of this hilltop home above the town of St. Helena, nature itself set the aesthetic tone. “We wanted to be as kind to the property as possible,” says homeowner Paula Brooks, a budding gardener. “I asked for native California plants, although I really didn’t know what that meant. I just knew I didn’t want to do something that didn’t belong there.”

To frame their new home with site-sensitive grounds, Brooks and her husband, Bob Cook, enlisted landscape architect Ron Lutsko Jr. of San Francisco’s Lutsko Associates. The couple’s demanding venture-capital careers had left little time for home life, but now retired, they were ready, Brooks says, “to nest.” They envisioned a tranquil refuge, but the couple’s garden preferences—drought-tolerant plants that could co-exist with the native blue oaks and still deliver the pleasure of color year-round—presented a challenge.

With that agenda, Lutsko helped define the spiraling route from the valley floor to the home site, past vineyards and through natural stands of oak and maple. Reaching the top and the couple’s arrival courtyard, “you almost have that hill-town experience,” says Lutsko, “where you come out on the town and everything unfolds.” The designer wrapped honey-hued stone walls around this crushed-stone court, then planted a welcome mat of lime-green *Euphorbia*, Spanish lavender and bearded iris. Large limestone pavers and a cluster of urns direct guests to the front door.

Lutsko strengthened the link between house and surroundings in the large interior courtyard with a pair of agapanthus-wreathed reflecting pools that capture the image of a nearby ridgetop. “It was about bringing that distant landscape into the space,” says the designer, who installed another reflecting pool in the pergola-

shaded bedroom terrace. Brooks and Cook often lunch there, and from its comfortable chaises, they can also savor a sunset.

“The terraces and courtyards were conceived as a series of outdoor rooms,” says Lutsko. “It’s like they’re extensions of the house, and beyond is wild oak woodlands.”

Since the native oaks want no water beyond what nature provides, Lutsko looked to non-thirsty plants to complement them and fulfill the client’s desire for color. In late winter and early spring, the airy blossoms of *Euphorbia* ‘Limewall’ with their lemon-yellow centers float above the silvery foliage and amethyst blooms of *Lavandula stoechas*. The deep-purple ‘Eleanor Roosevelt’ iris shows its colors next, followed by santolina and French lavender. *Epilobium californica* (California fuchsia) brings up the rear, unfurling its brilliant scarlet flowers in late summer and fall.

In retrospect, Lutsko believes he achieved a result that pleases him as well as his client. He devised a modern garden that still retained a lot of warmth and texture while acknowledging the wild beauty of the setting. Brooks got the seamless transition she sought from native surroundings to the cultivated landscape. “Ron made it so that the house belongs there,” she says. “There isn’t this abrupt departure from what was already here to what’s here now.”

See Resources, last pages.

Opposite (clockwise from top left): *Santolina* ‘Lemon Queen’ provides a sunny splash of yellow in the arrival courtyard. *Clematis jackmanii* and *Wisteria venusta* drape a pergola over the bedroom terrace, above a pond carpeted with white water lilies and *Iris louisiana* ‘Sea Wisp.’ At the home’s entry, the deciduous *Parthenocissus henryana* partially cloaks a wall. In the interior courtyard, agapanthus nod their heads above a reflecting pool.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARION BRENNER. WRITTEN BY JANET FLETCHER.



Quercus douglasii (blue oak) stands sentry at the courtyard gate, its cool-bluish leaves contrasting with the peachy warmth of sunlit stone. Massed drifts of *Lavandula stoechas* and *Lavandula 'Grosso'* weave through small-scale bearded irises and the showstopping lemon-lime clusters of *Euphorbia 'Limewall'*.