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02



making the most of a lot

For this San Diego family,
a small property proved to
have unlimited possibilities

STORY BY SUSAN HEEGER ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK COYIER



Wanting outdoor living spaces all around their new Southern California house, Mickey and Lisa Morera, parents of an active 2-year-old, asked landscape designer Debora Carl for help. In the front garden, Carl added privacy with a 2-foot-high berm planted with yucca, New Zealand flax, a dragon tree, *Senecio mandraliscae* and Mexican feather grass. Opposite: For structural interest, Carl turned a simple metal container into a sculpture.

Among places Carl created for loafing, Lisa and daughter Carmen like to read beneath the front garden's magnolia and carob trees preserved from the previous landscaping. Around their bench, against a backdrop of the New Zealand native, *Cassinia leptophylla*, are silver *Astelia*, Berkeley sedge, gray lavender and 'Pumpkin Pie' African daisies (detail opposite).





Some five blocks from the coast in Del Mar, California, in a neighborhood of funky beach shacks and modern monoliths, lots are cramped and seclusion is at a premium. But the sun shines all year and the sea breeze moderates the heat, so outside is the place to be, especially for an active family. Which is why, when Mickey and Lisa Morera decided to redo their shack (Mickey's onetime bachelor pad), they pictured an open-plan house enclosed by a sheltering garden. "Homes here are on top of each other," observes Mickey, a commercial real estate broker who bought the original 1940s cottage in 1997 and married Lisa, a biochemist (now stay-at-home mom), five years later. "We like our neighbors, but we needed privacy."

Having admired a friend's house nearby, they hired his architect, Kevin Farrell, to rethink theirs. Farrell took their concept and ran with it, nixing the shack altogether for a California-contemporary house designed around a private courtyard, with outdoor living spaces front and back. At the earliest stage — before the foundation was even poured — garden designer Debora Carl entered the picture, ensuring that house and garden evolved as matching parts of a happy whole.

The house itself has smooth stucco walls with stacked-stone



Opposite: The private front patio, sheltered from the street by the grassy berm and the silver boughs of an acacia, is furnished for year-round use with synthetic rattan armchairs. **Right:** Mickey asked for an outdoor kitchen, where he could grill in the courtyard adjacent to the indoor kitchen. The Kenji dining table and benches are a green product crafted of paper-based material and cellulose fibers infused with resin. **Below:** Sliding windows allow Lisa to send out more food for the grill as needed.



accents, concrete floors and a spirit, says Lisa, “somewhere between craftsman, modern and beach casual.” Most of its rooms open on adjoining gardens that mirror or complete them: The indoor kitchen overlooks the dining courtyard with its complementary open-air kitchen, barbecue and fireplace. The street-facing living room is sheltered by a planted berm, which creates a backdrop for a hidden meadow and seating spot. The glass doors of the indoor dining room open to an alfresco lounge complete with fire pit, rustling palms and water spilling into a spa. Even with neighbors all around, the garden feels private thanks to well-placed hedges and the orientation of the outdoor rooms, which relate to the house, not the world at large.

“There’s a seamless flow between indoors and out,” says Carl, who attributes this to a close collaboration among clients, architect, garden maker and builder Bruno Büchler. The team made key decisions on colors and materials, and each choice led to others. One early call, for example, was the “worn-leather” hue of the home’s poured-concrete floors. This helped determine the rich chocolate color of the exterior stucco which, in turn, inspired many of Carl’s plant picks in a harmonious range of bronzes, burgundies and mixed green tones.

Indoor architectural details, such as inlaid floor “carpets” of pebble aggregate, honed black-granite counters and stacked Apache Cloud fireplace stone, made their way into Carl’s landscape too, reappearing in patios and around the barbecue, fire elements and doors. Of course, the garden also shows up prominently inside, in the form of leafy



views through every window. "Our concept," Carl explains, "was to erase hard divisions between being in the house or out to create one unified, self-contained space."

When Mickey bought the former clapboard cottage, it sat indifferently in its setting, a pair of scrappy lawns, with two trees (a magnolia and a carob) in the front yard and a row of queen palms in the back. As the new house took shape, the Moreras focused their landscape goals. "Besides screening from the street, we wanted to enter the house through a garden," Mickey recalls. "We like the desert, but we wanted a slightly lush, more dynamic look, but still low-maintenance. And we wanted the sound of water and the warmth of fire to take the chill off nights."

Carl and her clients preserved the trees, not just for screening and shade but also to give the new house and gardens a sense of age. For privacy from the street, she graded the front flat with the 2-foot bermed edge, and she topped that with plants that shine against the deep-brown stucco house and thrive in California's climate. Since the front garden has the lot's best



Above: In keeping with the modern architecture of the house, Carl chose simple concrete benches for a spot beside a bamboo grove in the rear garden. **Right:** Nearby, the sound of water sluicing down a curved granite wall strikes a cooling note. Leading past the fountain, concrete pavers were interplanted with dwarf mondo grass, now joined by baby's tears. To the right, a toddler-friendly sandbox, where Carmen holds play dates, is nestled among bird's-nest ferns and kentia palms. A rack on the adjacent fence turns surfboards into outdoor ornament.





light, she planted sun-loving, drought-tolerant Australian and South African natives: coast rosemary, New Zealand flax 'Dark Delight', *Senecio mandraliscae* and 'Orange Cross' kangaroo paws. To evoke a beach-close dune, she planted grasses that toss in the breeze: blue fescue grass and Mexican feather grass.

"We love how natural and earthy her choices are," says Lisa, who road-tripped to nurseries with Carl to pick dramatic accent plants like dragon tree, dune aloe and beaked yucca (*Dracaena draco*, *Aloe thraskii* and *Yucca rostrata*). They also chose outdoor furniture together, mostly clean-lined modern pieces from grounded, their favorite local garden shop.

Even in areas where paving rules (e.g., the dining courtyard), Carl softened the corners with planted cutouts full of kentia palms, red fountain grass and asparagus ferns. In the back, where the lot is shadiest, she balanced stone terraces and the spa with deep borders of more kentia palms and ferns, sparked by burnished-red ti plant and red-flowering *Grevillea*. Though a lap pool was once planned for this spot, along came baby Carmen, now age 2, so a spa and sandbox seemed like better options.

"She's learning to swim in the spa," says Lisa. "Her friends come to play, and there's room for tricycles and our dog to run around, and for us and our friends to relax by the fire pit after dinner." So much for the beachside squeeze. 🐾

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DEBORA CARL ON LIVING BIG IN SMALL SPACES

Even if your lot is limited in size, you can still have a great outdoors by following these tips.

- **Keep it simple:** Too much complexity makes small gardens feel cramped and confusing. Choose straight lines rather than curves, and limit colors and materials. A few plant varieties, each featured en masse, are more effective than a mixed crowd of many individual specimens. For pizzazz, spice up a dark-green border with a swath of chartreuse foliage, or toss an orange cushion on a muted chair.
- **Think in terms of human scale:** Even in pint-size places, don't miniaturize key components such as furniture and patios, or make paths too narrow. Fewer well-sized items make spaces more inviting, so you'll use them more.
- **Don't shy away from a single large, dramatic statement:** One big element, such as the curved granite water wall beside the Moreras' spa, can create a focal point for a garden area, drawing attention and prompting people to gather there.
- **Repeat interior colors and materials outside, and vice-versa:** Minimizing the distinction between indoors and out can make both house and garden seem larger by extension. Let floors flow out onto patios and garden colors show up in the living room. Wherever you are, your view will make all you see appear as part of a whole.
- **Don't neglect your fences:** They are the walls of your outdoor rooms and often show up more prominently in small spaces, where you have less room to cover them up with greenery. Choose paint or stain colors to harmonize with the house, and add panels of interesting materials (such as the galvanized metal at the Moreras') to set off leafy silhouettes and other visually striking elements.

A photograph of a family of four enjoying a backyard patio. A woman, a man, and a young child are gathered around a modern, dark-colored fireplace built into a stone wall. The woman is holding a marshmallow over the fire, and the child is also reaching for it. The man is sitting on a modern outdoor lounge chair, watching them. A black dog is lying on the ground in the foreground. The patio is surrounded by lush tropical landscaping, including a large palm tree, a banana plant, and various other greenery. The background shows a house with a stone chimney and a wooden fence.

A fireplace of Apache Cloud ledger-stone and slate provides a stage for Lisa, Carmen and Mickey to make s'mores as their dog, Sugar, relaxes. Opposite, left: Outside the home's dining room, a concrete fire element with an ipe bench takes the chill off cool nights while the nearby fountain adds its soothing soundtrack. Opposite, right: Near the spa, colored concrete pavers (poured in place), planted with asparagus fern and dwarf New Zealand flax, bring the garden closer to the lounging patio.