

An Eco-Warrior

Renowned landscape designer Trace Robinson walks us through a bounty of Earth-savvy approaches to home gardening.

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Award-winning landscape designer Trace Robinson is a creative strategist when it comes to organic, sustainable gardens. She's an eco-warrior in a sun hat with a long list of clients, including a few in the household-name category. Her arsenal of wisdom informs the design, planting, and maintenance of some of the most beautiful sustainable gardens in Santa Barbara County. A quick look at her approach offers up easy, useful tips.

For projects of any size, water consumption is the first thing Trace checks. "What are the major water guzzlers here, and how can we reduce?" she says. Ripping out (or reducing) lush lawns is always step one. In a recent redo, she used a pair of mature olive trees to anchor a stone gravel bed with native grasses, perennials, and flowering succulents that attract hummingbirds, bees, and butterflies. "Trace has created an environment that welcomes natural inhabitants, bunnies, and a family of quail," says Montecito homeowner and client Christine Lyon. "She transformed a traditional lawn garden into a natural, drought-resistant heaven."

The next step for Trace is assessing trees, the storage units of planet-warming carbon. "Most people don't see trees as the assets they are ... and how much they increase the value of a property by providing food, privacy screens, natural borders, and habitats," she says. The size and cost of introduced trees depend on budget and patience. "In planting new trees, I tend to go big, especially if they're fruit-bearing, and if the goal is to reduce energy use by providing shade on a home," she says. "Place your trees with intention,



Trace Robinson arranges wisteria, iceberg roses, and salvia. Drought tolerant plants don't have a long vase life but are profuse in blooms and often highly fragrant.

then patios, stonework and hardscape can come later."

When it comes to plant selection, Trace prefers native perennials and low-water Mediterranean types to suit California's climate zone. She chooses plants that contribute in four categories:

fragrance (salvia, lavender, and scented geranium are among her go-to's); color (based on the client's personal preference; hot pink and reds attract hummingbirds); texture for visual interest and to add depth of field; and utility in producing food, attracting pollinators, creating



A wisteria-laden pergola replaced a water-consuming lawn to provide shade, a place for peace and relaxation, and an outdoor entertaining area to increase a home's usable square footage.

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areas, hedges, and hillsides to provide extra protection against thirsty varmints or stray soccer balls. “We’ve seen climatic changes in recent years affect California’s typically dry and wet seasons,” she says, so she suggests shutting off irrigation

to established plants from October to April of wet years and scaling up again as warmer months approach. “Remember to reprogram irrigation timers at the start of each season and expand drip line perimeters to match the canopies of trees

as they grow larger each year,” she says.

Like most organic gardeners, Trace is mad for mulch. It’s her number one solution to minimize weeds, contain moisture, and regulate soil temperatures. She opts for organic, nutrient-rich compost blends (many are now available commercially) with a depth of three to six inches for primary beds. She also suggests that homeowners ask professional tree trimmers to chip and keep mulch material for home garden use, or find a friendly arborist who will supply wood chips from known trees. Free city mulch is an option for nonfood-producing beds, but beware of lumber or palm frond content, which is hard to break down, and non-beneficial oils from eucalyptus, nicotiana (native tobacco), and castor bean.

Natural solutions to garden pests can be as simple as mixing a bit of liquid soap with water and spraying it on affected plants. Trace also relies on companion planting — adding rosemary, salvia, onion and garlic varieties, lavender, and tagetes (marigold family) to gardens to deter ants, moles, and gophers. Gopher-ridden regions may require raised beds with wire netting or DIY root baskets. For these, Trace uses aviary wire, with smaller mesh and thicker gauge, instead of chicken wire.

Seed collecting can be another satisfying DIY project for home gardeners. “Let a few existing plants — carrots, larkspur, cilantro, lettuce, celery, basil, dill, poppies — go to seed and bank those, or allow volunteers to flourish in a new cycle,” Trace says. The fact that they’ve bloomed and gone to seed means they’re proven winners and ideal for trading or sharing with friends.

Any gardener knows that creating a successful ecosystem takes time, but there are plenty of places to get started. Ditch lawns. Plant natives. Invest in trees. Encourage healthy soil. Irrigate responsibly. Provide water sources for bees, butterflies, and birds. Allow habitat. As Trace says, “Small, healthy ecosystems from sustainable gardening add up to improve our environment, our communities, our lives, and our planet.”

shade and habitat, and controlling soil erosion with naturalizing natives like ceanothus and toyon, iris and yarrow.

Working in zones, Trace places plants needing more care and water closest to the house, with low-water and drought-tolerant plants toward the farther reaches of a yard or property. She installs cut flower gardens where water use in a smaller area produces maximum yield. The ability to bring outdoor beauty into a home through floral bouquets cut from one's own garden is one of her trademarks and the focus of an upcoming book documenting her work.

For vegetable gardens, she sometimes goes rogue. "I like to add edibles — lettuce, chard, kale, and culinary herbs — into flower beds or tucked between pavers,

Mature olive trees anchor this former lawn that's mostly surface gravel with drift plantings of lavender, flowering succulents, and bunch grasses.



Colorful kangaroo paw and salvia pop next to a drought-resistant boxwood border.

wherever it's easy to snip while cooking," she says. She's also excited for "BBQ rosemary," a fast-growing variety called *Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Barbeque' with super sturdy, highly scented stems that can be used as skewers and swizzle sticks for summer entertaining.

When it comes to irrigation, a little foresight goes a long way. Drip lines are more efficient than popups and effusive sprayers, an important factor in light of the water price increases forecast for Santa Barbara in 2025. Trace suggests subterranean drip lines in densely planted

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