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CASE STUDY

A Family Garden

RAISING SMALL CHILDREN AND A BIG DOG, ALLISON WRIGHT AND ANDY KAPLAN WERE content with a swing set, a cedar deck and a playhouse in this garden on the west side of Los Angeles. In the blink of an eye, they knew, those swings could come down, and the supporting structure would become an arbor—wisteria vines had already started up its posts. The cedar deck was a favorite dog-napping spot, while the playhouse served as a fort, a club, a hideout from Mom and Dad. “Our goal was to make the outdoors as usable and flexible as it could be,” explains Russ Cletta, a Venice, California, landscape architect, who, with his partner Jay Griffith, designed Wright and Kaplan’s garden to be “dog-and-child friendly, with lots of options for adults.”



A front courtyard is ideal for watching kids on swings, but its concrete bench can double as lounge or table. Its leafy scrim, a mix of phormiums and ‘Forest Pansy’ redbuds against a hedge, blocks the street while creating a green view for the living room. But in contrast to its paved restraint—it’s like a well-behaved garden lounge—there’s a wilder scene behind the house, beyond the deck: a fanciful woods of citrus, mayten and leptospermum with a bark path that curves around lavenders and seems to disappear. With a similar intent—to make the small lot appear endless—Griffith and Cletta planted its edges with the same eucalyptus that grows in nearby yards, so the “borrowed” trees are part of the picture.

When the designers arrived in 1999, Wright and Kaplan had owned their home, a pared-down, early-’90s-style house converted to a more contemporary design, for two years. Wright and Susan Minter, a London-based friend, had already redone the inside, changing windows, floors and finishes, replacing a kitchen wall with glass doors and generally lightening up the living space and tying it to the outside. Minter, an

Left: Tucked away in the garden out of sight of the house, the playhouse encourages creativity. Right: A wisteria arbor doubles as a swing set, with herbs and phormium dividing the play area from lounge space. *Sedum brevifolium* fills the seams between concrete paving.



Top: Susan Minter replaced a lawn with a spacious dining deck. Table by Randy Frank; chairs from Janus et Cie. Below: Bronze phormium, ‘Goodwin Creek’ lavender and *Agave attenuata* ‘Nova’ against a backdrop of blue westringia and pink and red New Zealand tea trees.



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architectural designer, had even swapped an unused side lawn for a deck, where Wright, who has a master's degree in psychology, and Kaplan, a TV executive, would often dine *en famille*.

But the garden didn't work for the family. Overly fussy, the entry court featured a series of slate ramps, steps and walls between the street and the front door. More walls and sprawling plants blocked views from the windows. And the side deck, though sleek, was devoid of green and unconnected to a raised rear terrace. "We had to unify the parts," says Cletta, "and pull the strong, minimalist lines of the blocky house into the landscape."

They replaced the slate with a clean grid of concrete pavers in the courtyard, planting sedum in the seams. In the adjoining space, they gave their arbor-cum-swing-set a soft, chipped-bark floor beneath and ran a low shrub border between the two, full of rosemary, lavender and 'Gold Sword' phormium. Beside the deck, they cut a long bed and packed it with fortnight lilies (*Dielytes bicolor*), tough plants that could take the shade of a neighbor's deodar cedars. And they linked deck and terrace by planting mayten trees on both and letting prostrate rosemary spill from upper to lower levels, obscuring the wall that divides them.

Up above they granted Wright's request for a "small jungle," mixing colors from the rest of the garden—rust, blue, olive green and chartreuse—into a dreamy pastiche of spiked, tumbling and overhanging plants. Westringia, phormium, agave and lavender, all drought-tolerant and low-maintenance, weave together under the trees, along the path that finally ends at the playhouse, a simple version of the big house. "Children love having places to hide," says Wright, who is tolerant of the youthful impulse to smear paint on playhouse walls.

They're only young once is the implication. Let them have their piece of earth. The family has since moved into bigger digs, again with the design assistance of Susan Minter and Cletta and Griffith. —SUSAN HEEGER

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