

# Sunset

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## Comfort food favorites

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**Tips for a small garden**

**DIVIDE THE GARDEN INTO "ROOMS"** Russ Cletta gave the backyard two distinctive spaces: one for living, the other for dining. Plants visually separate them. A lounging area is in front.

**PLAY WITH ILLUSION** To create a sense of depth, use low- to midheight plantings in the foreground, taller ones in back; enhance the effect with coarse-textured plants in the foreground, fine-textured ones in back. Choose accent plants to partially obscure background elements, which hint at "space beyond." Use plants to break up paving. Cletta positioned small planting beds where they'll force visitors to traverse the garden to reach the dining terrace.

**LIMIT THE COLOR PALETTE AND REPEAT PLANTINGS** Variations of green are soothing and uncomplicated in a small garden. Repeat plants throughout the garden for continuity, using color as accents. For privacy, plant a screen of trees around the property; Cletta uses podocarpus.



# Small yet abundant

Clean lines and artful illusion transform a compact garden

BY KATHRYN HARRIS PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVEN GUNTHER

**FOUR YEARS AGO**, this garden in Venice, California, was a funky 1970s backyard with brick paving, flimsy lattice-style wood fencing, and a redwood deck littered with knickknacks. Then Daniela Rechtszaid, a designer, transformed the house that she shares with partner Juan José Quintana from a one-bedroom cottage to a two-story contemporary home. During the remodel-

ing process, the yard was destroyed.

"I felt confident handling the interior spaces, but I was less sure with the exterior," Rechtszaid says. So she hired landscape architect Russ Cletta and gave him a list of must-haves: places to eat, to relax, to string a hammock, and to grow a treasured root beer plant (*Piper auritum*), whose scented leaves Quintana uses to



**BEFORE** Photo montage shows a jumble of overgrown plants and brick paving in the backyard. **AFTER** A "floating" bench and a fire bowl, which Cletta created from a colored concrete planter, make up the new living space. Blue bamboo helps screen dining area and guesthouse. Mondo grass grows between pavers.

ILLUSTRATION: DANIELE SCODIN

wrap cheese or flavor cooked fish.

Cletta—well known for creating functional and attractive outdoor spaces on the modest lots that proliferate in Venice—had just returned from Costa Rica when he took on the project. Impressions from his trip, along with the couple's heritages (Rechtszaid is from Buenos Aires, Quintana from Mexico City), determined the garden's tropical theme.

In the front yard, a hammock sways near lounge chairs. The backyard is for dining and entertaining. The living area features an L-shaped wooden bench designed by Cletta that appears to float

atop concrete. At night, when a fire glows nearby, this is a cozy spot. King palms edge the dining area. "When there's a breeze, they sound like running water," Cletta says.

For Quintana, a busy advertising executive who unwinds in his kitchen, the garden's other draws are its fruit trees. At a party last fall, the couple gathered 30 friends for dinner in their backyard. On the menu: an elaborate dish of stuffed chiles with walnut sauce that Quintana prepared using many ingredients plucked straight from the garden.

**DESIGN** Griffith and Cletta, Venice, CA (310/399-4727) ■



**BEFORE** Cleared of clutter, the front yard looked small and bare. **AFTER** A water feature and lush plantings add beauty and motion. Palms fringe backyard dining space (top center). Red cushions and chairs—like the curvy one shared by Quintana, Rechtszaid, and their miniature schnauzer, Cuba (top right)—add splashes of bold color.