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GARDEN



Fresh faced, yes. Green, no. Los Angeles landscape architect Cletta, 39, has overseen dozens of big-budget Hollywood projects and one low-priced production—his own backyard. Opposite: This garden wall may look like concrete, but it's really just cheap painted plywood. The upper tier cost nothing—it's the back side of his neighbor's fence. Cletta set the stage for dining alfresco with a Douglas fir deck, aluminum lawn chairs (\$25 each at Liz's Antique Hardware), and an old cafeteria table cut down to size and adorned with a set of wheels. Let the good times roll!

No permanent address? No problem. Just follow the lead of landscape architect Russ Cletta, who created a fresh, frugal, and fully mobile garden behind his Venice, California, rental. The finished yard is proof that you don't have to put down roots to, well, put down roots. Can you dig it?

BY SUSAN HEEGER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEBORAH JAFFE

Stepping stones, handmade from poured concrete, lead the way to a pair of cheap butterfly chairs, which are weather-resistant thanks to nylon mesh covers (about \$30 each) from Urban Outfitters. Cletta built the wall using sheets of Hardibacker (about \$10 for a three-foot-by-five-foot piece at Home Depot) and a Douglas fir frame. Star jasmine makes a dramatic ascent on a steel trellis (really just a mesh concrete reinforcement). Opposite, top left: Cletta's potted plants are truly potluck. His mix of inherited and purloined picks includes a trio of aloe varieties and a spiny Madagascar palm. Opposite, bottom center: Cletta assembled the freestanding Douglas fir deck in a single afternoon. Opposite, top right: A concrete bowl brims with *Kalanchoe thyrsiflora* "Bronze Sculpture," a South African plant that sends up yellow-flowered stalks to signal spring's arrival.



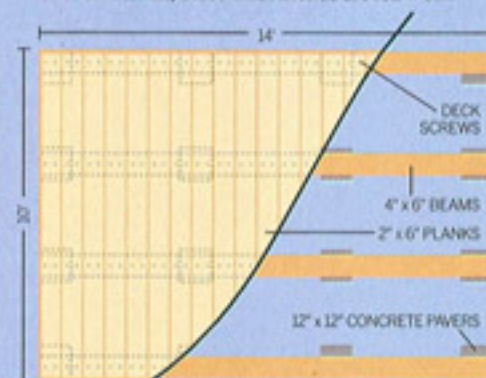
Sure, it seems crazy dropping cash to spruce up a place you rent, especially when you plan to move, well, one of these years, after you've saved enough dough for a down payment. But where is it written that just because you live lease to lease, you have to put up with peeling paint, closet doors that don't close, refrigerators that reek—or even a dusty, desolate, debris-strewn excuse for a yard?

For Russ Cletta, co-owner of the Los Angeles landscape architecture firm Griffith & Cletta, that kind of concession was never an option. The barren, underdeveloped lot that came with his Venice Beach rental hardly suited the plant-mad designer, who has shaped the ground beneath the feet of some of Tinseltown's most wanted actors, agents, and cover girls. Besides, the 800-square-foot, two-bedroom 1920s cottage, which he shares with partner Harry Gundersen, was in dire need of entertaining space. But without his A-list clientele's bankroll, Cletta had to punch up his plot with an eye on his wallet.

First, he struck a deal with his landlord: In exchange for home improvements—especially the garden overhaul—his rent wouldn't be raised a nickel as long as he remained a tenant. Then Cletta rolled up his sleeves, rescued orphaned plants, and used recycled (and recyclable) materials to keep costs low and create a backyard that's lush, lovely, and truly transplantable. The total of about \$4,000 for this good-to-go garden is a bushel of green. But that sum seems dirt cheap when you consider it includes a fountain, an outdoor

TOP DECK

Increasing the entertaining potential of a small backyard is easy with a deck—and luckily you don't have to be a master builder to get the party started. In fact, you should be able to find all the materials in one trip to your local Lowe's, Home Depot, or building-supply store. First, clear a 10-foot-by-14-foot area and rake it flat. Next, lay down four rows of four 12-inch-square precast concrete pavers (about \$21 for 16). You'll need to space them 40 inches apart to make up the length and 24 inches for the width. Lengthwise, on top of these supports, set four 4-inch-by-6-inch-by-14-foot pressure-treated Douglas fir beams. At \$60 each, they don't come cheap, but they do offer supreme support and rot resistance. Now, gather up 31 2-inch-by-6-inch-by-10-foot pressure-treated Douglas fir planks* (about \$11 each). Place the planks, edge to edge, across the beams (check out the illustration below). Using two-and-a-half-inch deck screws (an \$8 box will do you), fasten each plank to all four beams. To keep the deck shipshape, seal out the elements with a semisolid stain such as Cabot or Olympic, which you can buy at a paint store for around \$22 a gallon. The total cost of materials is less than \$700, and the labor should amount to nothing at all—if you call in a favor or two. After all, that's what friends are for. —S.H.



* NOTE TO MATH WHIZZES: You might think a 14-foot-wide deck would need only 28 six-inch-wide planks, but lumberjacks like to round up. So a "six-inch" width actually measures five and a half inches; therefore you'll need 31.



sofa, a deck, and two fences that (with the help of a few friends and a few Coronas) can be easily dismantled and reassembled at Cletta's next address.

To pull off this movable feast, the landscape architect first studied his lot, noting where the sun and shade fell, which views needed blocking, and what plants were worth keeping. "A garden needs focal points to draw you out, open spots to gather in, and visual screens for privacy," he says. So an existing Norfolk Island pine, which shelters the house and blots out phone lines, earned a place in his new scheme. But the sprawling eugenia hedges, which cramped the 30-foot-by-15-foot space, got the ax. Cletta replaced them with two kinds of walls, both streamlined and narrow. On the garden's east side, he put up a scrim of plywood—scavenged from job sites, then finessed with an oil-based, light gray stain—that borrows its top four feet from the back side of a neighbor's costly Plexiglas fence.

On the west side, Cletta tried an experiment, erecting a partition from Hardibacker, a pressed-concrete product designed to underlie ceramic tile. He sealed sheets of the material with a wood finish and attached them to a Douglas fir frame. This 9-foot-by-40-foot industrial-chic fence carries a \$967 price tag (not exactly minimalist but still \$400 cheaper than a comparable wooden version). And since the posts are just screwed to anchors—sunk in concrete with sacks of rapid-set cement—the structure can easily be undone in about an hour with a



power screwdriver. Is it durable? Like the rest of the garden, this inventive barrier has endured: three years and counting.

Once the area was enclosed, Cletta laid the groundwork. He evened out the terrain but skipped the typical sod-and-sprinkler routine in favor of a \$30 maintenance-free carpet made from two cubic yards of crushed three-quarter-inch gravel. When Cletta couldn't find the ideal stepping stones at any building yard, he made his own from poured concrete (see "Tread on Me," right). Next on deck: the deck. In a single afternoon Cletta built one from pressure-treated Douglas fir planks and beams, simply screwing them together and setting them to rest on concrete pavers (see "Top Deck," page 97). The low-slung structure sounds like a house of cards, but its weight holds it firmly in place. The six-inch-high platform defines the outdoor dining room, furnished with a steel table plucked from an office cafeteria and secondhand chairs spray-painted silver. Nearby, Cletta fashioned a sofa from a stack of cinder blocks, plus plywood and foam wrapped in remnant fabric (see "Concrete Comfort," above). With minimal assembly required, he was sitting pretty in no time.

To complete the picture, Cletta coughed up \$1,200 for a gas fireplace, made of a three-foot-wide concrete basin that holds black sand and crushed, tumbled glass (available at building-supply stores). "It's the one splurge I'll mostly have to leave behind," he concedes, "since the gas line alone cost \$800." But he's hardly been burned by

KNOW-HOW

CONCRETE COMFORT

Even couch potatoes need fresh air. Kicking back on an all-weather concrete sofa is easy and, rest assured, so is its construction. First, pick a location next to a building (which will lend a wall for back support), level an eight-foot-by-two-foot area, and cover it with a two-inch-thick blanket of builder's sand. You'll need about two skips' worth of the stuff (\$13 each at most hardware stores). For the base, round up 32 concrete blocks that measure 8 inches by 8 inches by 16 inches and usually cost about \$1 each. Lay out 16 of them, alternating the short and long sides, to fill the eight-foot-by-two-foot dimensions and abut the wall. Then top with a second layer of 16, mixing up the pattern for stability's sake. For the seating level, grab two three-quarter-inch-thick eight-foot-by-two-foot plywood boards (about \$25 total) and a two-inch-thick piece of high-density foam, measuring eight feet by two feet (\$20 at most upholstery and crafts stores). Stack the two boards together, then place the foam on top. Next, take about two and a half yards of a weather-resistant fabric like Sunbrella (available at www.outdoor-textiles.com for \$14 a yard) and wrap it around the foam and wood. Tuck the textile's edges underneath the boards and staple in place. The finishing touch? Pile with pillows for added padding and punch.

TREAD ON ME

Drive traffic in the right direction with stepping stones of your own making. First, lay your hands on some foot-long cardboard tubes, available at most building-supply stores for about \$1 each. (Cletta chose a variety of spans—from 15 to 30 inches across.) Next, using a Sawzall saw, slice each tube horizontally into four two-and-a-half-inch rings. Arrange them in your pattern of choice. Then settle the form firmly in the ground about two and a half inches deep. Remove the dirt within each circle down to its base and pat down the surface until it's level. Following the directions on the bag, blend and pour the cement. (Cletta tore through 25 60-pound sacks, about \$2 each, for the 14 stones in his garden.) With a trowel, smooth each paver level with the ground. When the cement is almost hard, sponge the surfaces to expose some sand grains for a coarser feel and better traction. Wait for the concrete to dry, peel the forms off, and run wild. —S.H.



dropping cash on his ring of fire—not only is it gorgeous, it ensures the garden remains a hot spot well into the night. A perfect (and portable) foil comes in the form of a concrete fountain filled with water hyacinth and powered by a submersible recirculating pump (about \$45 at Lowe's). "The combination of the sound of water and the warmth of fire lures people out," Cletta says.

Given the high volume of foot traffic and limited time, space, and funds, Cletta kept planting to a minimum. For greens, he chose Mexican weeping bamboos (a clumping noninvasive variety) which provided some much-needed height in a hurry. To help soften the bareness of the house and fence, he brought in two more affordable fast growers—evergreen grape to climb the walls and fragrant star jasmine to clamber up a trellis made of the steel mesh used to reinforce concrete. "I love raiding building stores," he admits, "and scouring local Dumpsters and alleys." That's how he picked up many of the pots, chairs, and at least some of the many container plants, which spill over the deck onto the gravel. But Cletta didn't mind shelling out good money for hardy, easy-to-maintain varieties, such as the striped succulent *furcraea* around his fire bowl. "They've got fibrous roots," Cletta explains. Like the rest of his garden, "they don't mind being transplanted." And when the time comes, neither will he. ■

For info on hiring landscape architect Russ Cletta to plant the seeds of style in your yard, call 310-399-4727.



And you thought cinder blocks were just for propping up old Pintos. Cletta assembled 32 of those concrete gems—plus some plywood and foam, both wrapped in Sunbrella fabric—to create an outdoor sofa fit for the most finicky lounge lizard. Opposite, top left: A silver paint job puts the shine on a traditional Adirondack chair, which cozies up to a shallow-rooted coral aloe in a simple clay pot. Opposite, bottom center: Cletta can afford to stop and smell the flowers—his garden, with Mexican weeping bamboos and scattered succulents, is about as low maintenance as they come. Opposite, top right: Cletta burned through big money—about \$1,200—to light this fire, but his pit's a real gas. The neighboring concrete fountain is something to spout about at only \$225.