



DESIGNER PORTFOLIO

LED BY THE LAND

Bernard Trainor shares how he designs architecturally savvy gardens that harmonize with the landscape and adhere to his climate-appropriate, soil-appropriate, foliage-first philosophy.

BY THAD ORR

WORLD-RENOWNED PLANT

EXPERT and garden designer Bernard Trainor found his life's work purely by happenstance after graduating from high school in Australia without ever having set foot in a garden. "After graduation," he says, "a friend told me about an apprenticeship in horticulture, and I said, 'What's horticulture?'" But Trainor took a shot at the opportunity—a hands-on job at Mornington Peninsula Shire, where he did everything from nursery propagating and growing to maintaining hiking trails and planting along roadsides.

"The 5-year apprenticeship changed the way I think about plants," Trainor says, now famous for developing gardens with architectural gravitas and climate-appropriate plants that work in harmony with the surrounding landscape. "Everything we were planting just kept dying because it wasn't well adapted to the environment in Australia," he says. "My mind couldn't fathom it. It was such a waste after spending so much time propagating, growing, transporting, and digging holes."

After his apprenticeship was over, Trainor spent the next several years learning how to incorporate climate-appropriate plants into gardens. "I knew

that if I was ever going to have a say in what plants were selected I'd better know something about landscape design," Trainor says. His quest led him to complete the landscape design program at Holmesglen in Australia. Wanting to learn even more about design, he earned a garden design diploma from the English Gardening School at the Chelsea Physic Garden in London to supplement his hands-on experience.

The real turning point in Trainor's career came in 1989 when he started a year-long internship working for the late horticulturist Beth Chatto around the time her now-famous drought-tolerant gravel garden in Essex was being developed. Chatto's garden was cutting edge—"prior to hers, gravel gardens didn't exist," Trainor says. "She had a way of selecting only the plants that fit the climate, fit the soil, and looked beautiful together." Working with plants from all over the world, Chatto focused on their form and foliage. "She'd say, 'Flowers come and go, so make sure the foliage looks good together,'" Trainor says.

After leaving the Beth Chatto Gardens and tackling a few solo design projects back in Australia, Trainor shifted his business to the United States, eventually

opening a design/build company in California in 1995. "I came on a 2-year work visa but fell in love with California and my future wife, so I stayed," he says. He started with small projects or single parts of gardens, but gradually he began taking on larger design jobs. "I loved the small projects with singular focus," Trainor says. "These projects are what taught me the most about design—really learning how to think about and construct a fountain or steps or a wall. Then I began working on larger designs, which felt like doing a lot of small projects that I could put together like a puzzle."

As the lead designer at Ground Studio, formerly Bernard Trainor + Associates, Trainor still plants with the climate-appropriate, soil-appropriate, foliage-first philosophy he learned from Chatto years ago, but he has since put his own unique spin on the plants and how all the pieces of a garden fit together and integrate with the land. "Often the best parts are already on the land," he says—"a view, a tree, the topography, the house, a stream, a hillside, a wall, or a piece of art. You just have to clear away the distractions, and your own ego, and learn to recognize them."



Abundant plantings and understated materials connect the architecture with the broader landscape and keep the eye focused on natural vistas. *Koeleria* 'Barkoel', clumping *Festuca mairei*, and creeping thyme weave through and around an ipe deck, a concrete-strip patio, and a vanishing-edge pool that reflects the trees and sky. Furniture is from Knoll's Richard Shultz 1966 Collection.



Tranor designed this garden to be multidimensional, with spaces for different activities and weather conditions. At right, a glass-walled pool room provides a spot to relax when it's windy or cool. From the ipe deck outside it, a boulder path meanders next to a coast live oak and then forks: The path to the left leads to the home, while the path to the right leads to a fire pit space tucked out of sight along the side of the house.



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PROJECT 1

READING THE LAND

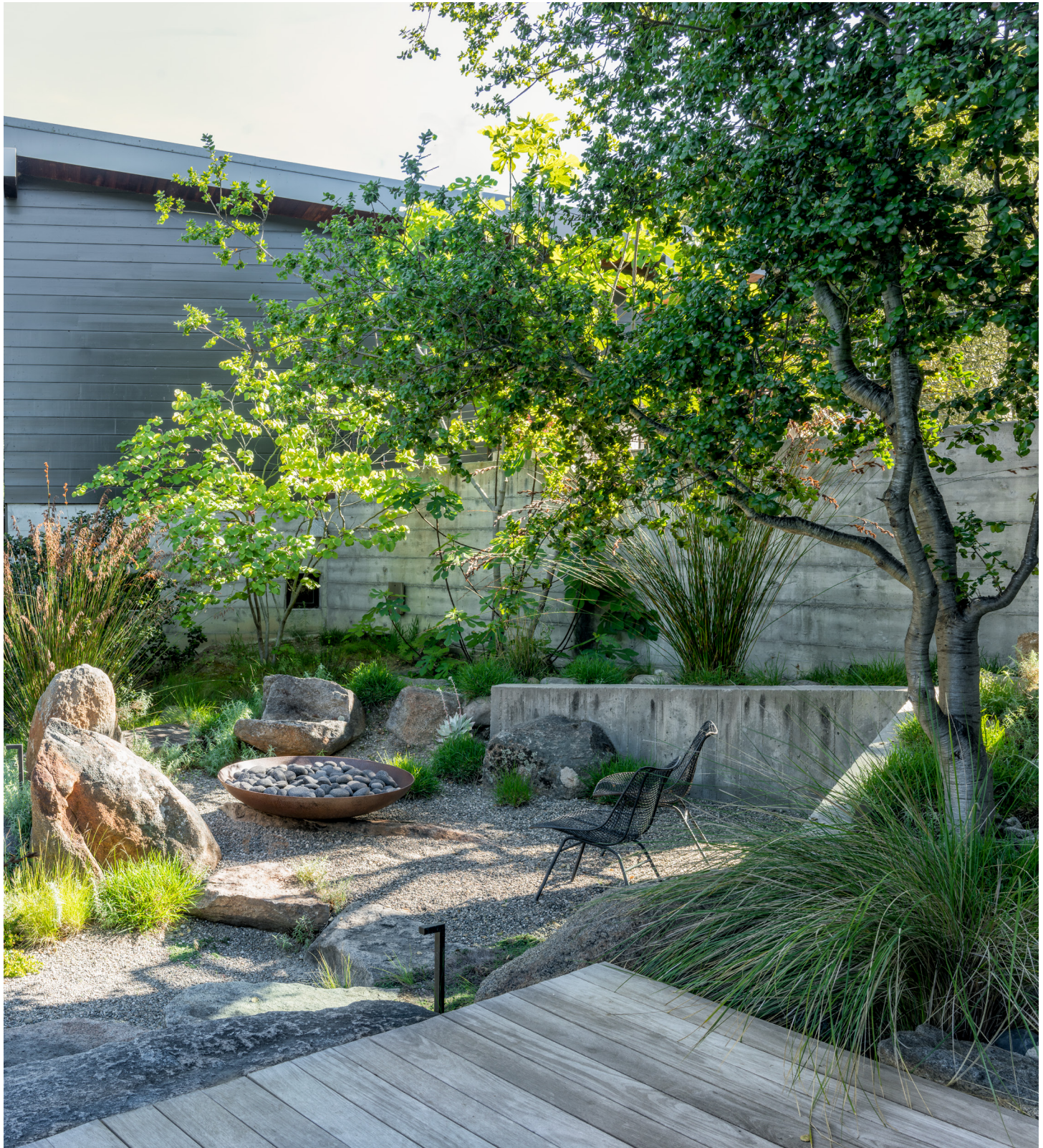
EXISTING COAST LIVE OAKS, rolling hills, and boulders created a beautiful setting for this home in Salinas, California, but it also meant that about 75 percent of the 3-acre property couldn't be built on. “Though it sounds cliché, this is where the best parts of the project emerged—from the constraints of the site,” Trainor says. “We had to weave the garden through the spaces not covered by the existing structures, trees, or inaccessible topography.” At the same time, the outdoor living elements needed to live up to the grandness of the home's strong architecture and the views.

Each element was built into the landscape so it wouldn't distract from the native surroundings: The pool extends from the hillside between large oaks. Decks, patios, and steps cascade off the back of the house down the slope. A fire pit and stone sitting boulders nestle into a naturalistic nook in the garden. Trainor also opted to stick to humble materials for hardscaping—wood, concrete, and natural stone—and then knitted those elements together with plants. All the oaks were preserved. Smaller trees such as Western redbud and ‘Mission’ fig were tucked near walls. Grasses weave their way around boulders, decks, and patios. Creeping thyme grows between gaps in the concrete patio.

“Plants make the design,” he says. “If you're not placing plants into every nook in a garden, then you're missing an opportunity—like a painter building a wonderful canvas but not painting it.”



"You have to entice people into the garden while entertaining them along the way," Trainor says. On a path along the side of the house, a large fountain carved out of dark stone draws people out to a sitting area under the coast live oaks. *Aeonium nobile* and *A. arboreum* 'Atropurpureum' fill concrete pots along the walkway. Pots are from San Marcos Growers.



"I find intimate, secluded spaces in a garden are just as important as grand vistas," Trainor says. This fire pit area was nestled between the house and a music studio where the home's concrete foundation provides refuge from the wind. Large boulders screen this space from the path and the rest of the garden. Along with the naturalistic plantings—including a Western redbud, ornamental grasses, thatching reed, *Dudleya brittonii*, and a fig tree—the boulders help tie the area into the larger landscape.

PROJECT 3

BLURRING BOUNDARIES

ON THIS ROUGHLY HALF-ACRE GARDEN in Palo Alto, California, Trainor's main priority was making it impossible to tell where one property ended and the adjacent one began. "Each garden should feel like a world all of its own where you don't see any other homes or structures," Trainor says. "You have to blur the boundaries created by humans."

To create this effect, Trainor designed the backyard plantings in layers to lift the eye from the garden to the views beyond so that when the homeowners looked out of the home, all they would see are open spaces filled with grasses and trees and the sky—not the fence along the property line or neighboring homes. Rather than create a rigid hedgerow to block those views, he planted a loosely maintained row of *Podocarpus gracilior*. To break up the monotony, he planted some Chinese pistache, *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem', and *Sequoia sempervirens* in front of and next to the row. He then added layers of grasses of different heights—the taller *Pennisetum spathiolatum* and *Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster' closest to the hedge and the shorter *Sesleria* 'Campo Azul' behind a new pool.

He created a similar transitioning effect in the front yard, integrating naturalistic plantings and boulders with architectural elements. "You don't want people stepping out of their car and all they see is a wall of house," he says. Plantings and landscape walls get gradually taller as one approaches the front door, helping to close the distance between ground and roof, and tall oaks scrim parts of the house, softening its impact.

Whether you're entering or exiting this garden, there's a story that unfolds as you move through the space. "This garden is a microcosm of a native savannah," Trainor says. "In Australia, or even here in California, when you hike in the grasslands, you walk through open spaces filled with grasses and dotted with trees. It's very memorable." Though it looks naturalistic, this garden is highly planned. Even the boulders out front were carved, placed, and buried at just the right level so they look like they were always there. "It's an interesting balance," Trainor says. "Creating a naturalistic look in a garden takes lots of planning, editing, and revisions."

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The approach to this home meanders through a meadow and under a canopy of coast live oak trees with changes in paving underfoot. "I didn't want the walkway to the front door to look like a runway," Trainor says. *Carex divulsa* blankets the ground below the oaks, and strappy *Phormium* 'Green Glow' dots other parts of the landscape. The path, seat walls, and large carved stones add interest along the way, slowing down the walk from the street to the home. *Prunus* Bright 'N Tight hides a fence at right.





The key to making this roughly 8,000-square-foot backyard feel bigger was blurring the edges along the property line behind the white landscape wall. The neighboring house is still slightly visible but will disappear behind fern pine screening. Layers of grasses—*Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster', *Sesleria* 'Campo Azul', *Pennisetum spathiolatum*—along with *Pistacia chinensis* and *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem' trees—step up to the view of the distant trees, making those trees feel like they are part of the garden. An *Olea* 'Wilsonii' is angled over the poolside seating area.