

HOME DINING RECREATION TRAVEL COMMUNITY HEALTH SHOPPING

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FINDING TRANQUILITY

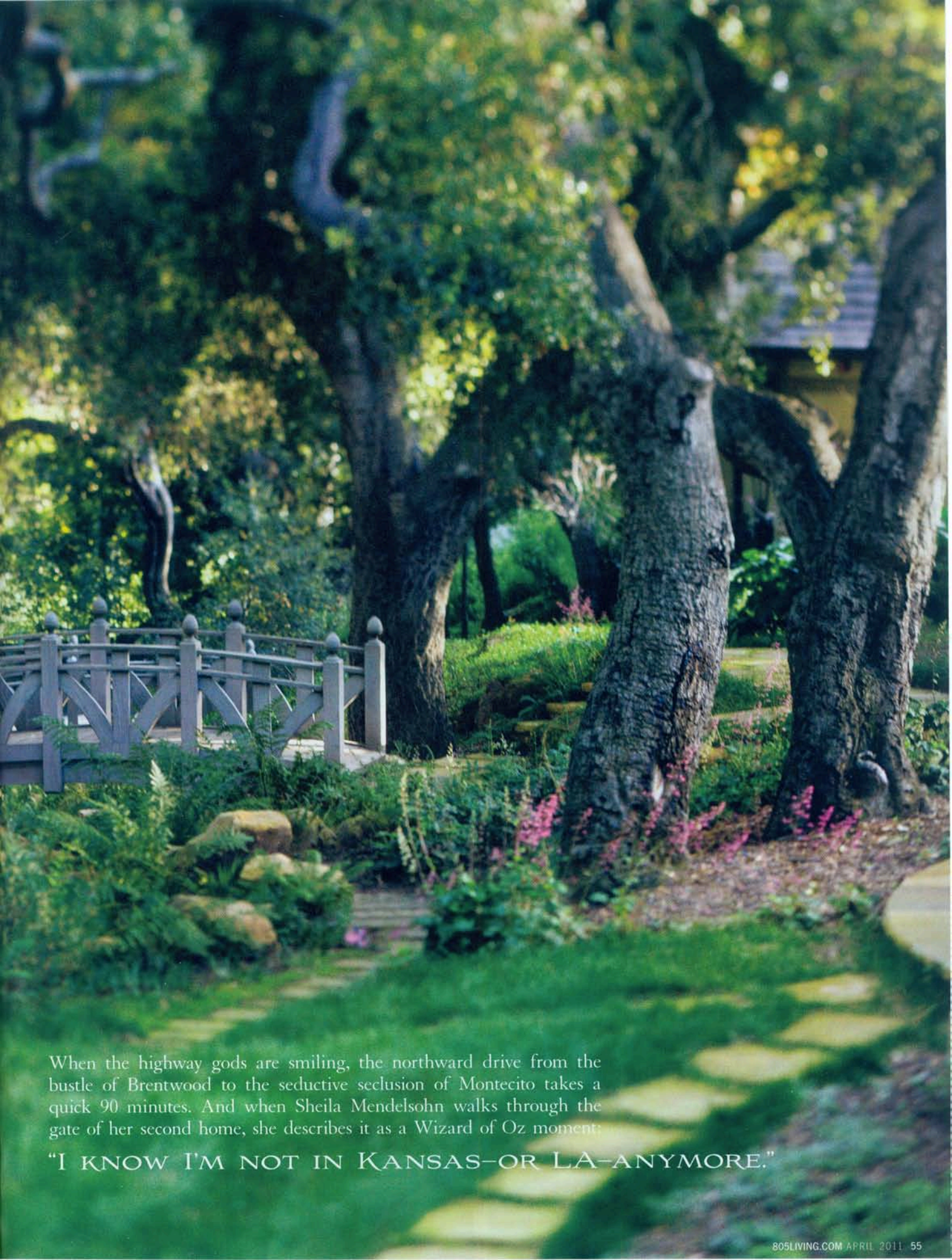
AMID THE OAKS

FORM AND FUNCTION
MEET IN A LUSH, LEAFY
CUSTOM-DESIGNED OASIS.

BY BILLY GOODNICK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY MOSS

With a gentle hand, landscape architect Susan Van Atta embraced Montecito's signature coast live oaks and their serene canopies, creating a series of intimate gardens for quiet contemplation. Flagstone paths meander between venerable tree trunks and over a stream, leading to an exotic pavilion. Water, frogs, and birds provide the sound track.



When the highway gods are smiling, the northward drive from the bustle of Brentwood to the seductive seclusion of Montecito takes a quick 90 minutes. And when Sheila Mendelsohn walks through the gate of her second home, she describes it as a Wizard of Oz moment:

"I KNOW I'M NOT IN KANSAS-OR LA-ANYMORE."



She purchased the oak-forested, sloping one-acre property in 2001, yearning for a place to get away. The small, dilapidated French Normandy-style house—formerly the caretaker's quarters of a larger estate—could be restored. “I didn’t need a house as much as I needed a *place*,” she says. “This property just spoke to me.”

Mendelsohn and her husband, Joel, entertain formally at their primary residence. Because the house could also be enlarged, this refuge to the north would be where she, and sometimes a few girlfriends, could “just be.”

With help from Los Angeles-based architect Tanya Rosenberg, they developed a plan to restore and enlarge the storybook house. Heeding the county’s requirement to leave dozens of mature coast live oaks undisturbed, they added needed space by excavating below the original house’s footprint. A garage and two small, octagonal buildings—guest quarters and hobby room—would sit unobtrusively on the lower portion of the property.

Mendelsohn hired Santa Barbara landscape architect Susan Van Atta to complete her dream. The two pored over pictures of gardens of every style. It didn’t take long for Van Atta to translate the look and feel her client desired to the site: tranquil places, niches for indulging in Mendelsohn’s

passion for knitting, and areas where entertaining could be done on an intimate scale when family accompanied her. The designer’s challenge was to artfully marry these requirements to the distinctive character of the property.

“My first impression was, ‘It’s all about the oak trees,’” Van Atta recalls. “Like a place you’d come across on a hike.”

Mendelsohn loved the idea of living along a stream, but a nearby tributary of Cold Spring Creek was on her neighbor’s land, hidden down a steep bank behind a rustic sandstone wall. Undaunted, Van Atta recontoured the land to create a naturalistic, rocky watercourse that flows into a small pond. A series of small cascades fill the garden with the sound and coolness of flowing water.

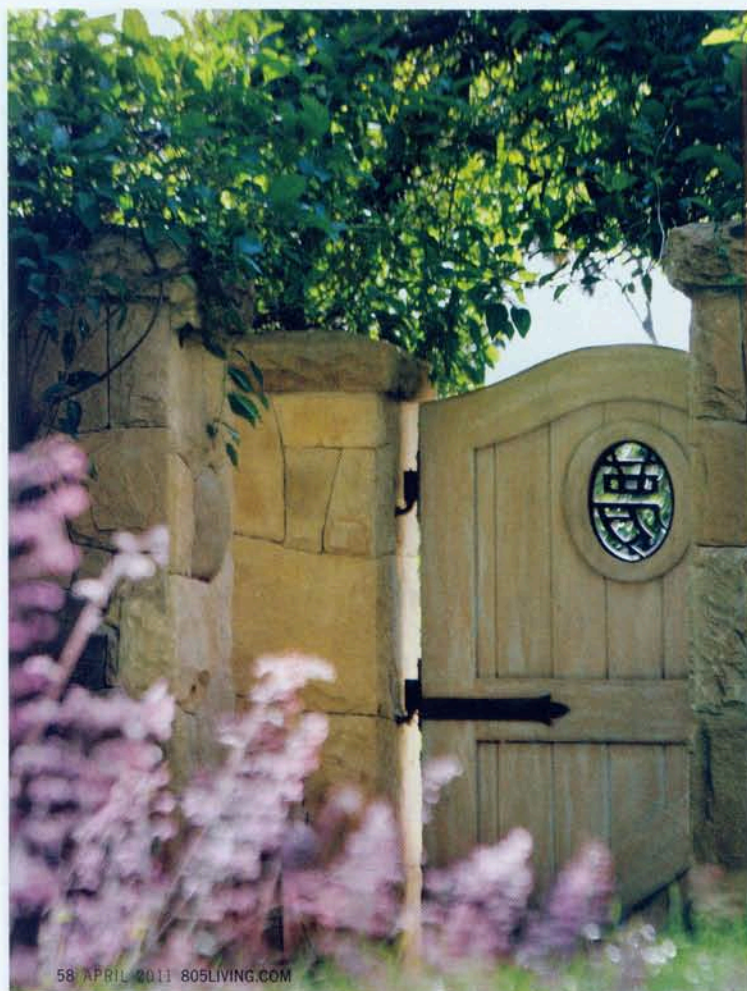
There was another problem: How to create a system of paths across a property with 40 feet of elevation change and an obstacle course of oak trees? The solution was a hierarchy of routes and surfaces. The primary walkways and steps—closely fitted flagstone grouted to a solid concrete foundation—steer clear of surface roots. Secondary paths use informally arranged slabs set gently on the soil, while remote areas are simply topped with earth-colored shale to blend with the surrounding soil.

THIS PAGE: Places for quiet contemplation and hobbies dot the property, softened by a palette of rich green. Moisture rising from the pond cools the air at Sheila Mendelsohn’s favorite garden room, a Balinese pavilion (above and opposite) from The Sacred Space (thesacredspace.com) in Summerland. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Local sandstone plays many roles—water courses over cobbles in the handcrafted creek adorned by native fern fronds (top left), and the house walls are warmed with their golden glow (far right, top and bottom). Pure white rockrose blossoms (bottom left) turn on their sunshine, and wisps of coral bells (bottom right) bring subtle touches to an emerald landscape.





THIS PAGE: Flowers and foliage share the spotlight throughout the garden. Mountain lilac (*Ceanothus* species) breaks bud in late winter, its cool blue flowers adding a soft glow (above left). At the sunny front porch (above center), Van Atta used shrubs with bright foliage to animate the entrance and flanked the door with rustic urns planted with bronzy blades of New Zealand flax. Like little berets (near right), caps from nearby eucalyptus trees rest on creeping thyme that softens the gaps between stones, while delicate, milky-colored leaves of *Westringia* "Morning Light" (far right)—a tough Aussie that loves to bake in the sun—brighten the bed. A bell-shaped arbor (below left) supports trumpet vines, repeating the arc of the gate's grill. The Chinese symbol in the gate reminds the owner to "dream." **OPPOSITE PAGE:** In contrast to the natural ripples of the terrain and the rugged oaks, these artfully crafted stairs and landing accent another outdoor space furnished with a bubbling urn fountain and lusciously leafy bear's-breech (*Acanthus mollis*). Hot pink buds from a young Canadian redbud tree say spring has come to the hills of Montecito.



There are six outdoor rooms, each with a distinct purpose and mood. At the uppermost portion of the property, a Chinese-inspired gazebo holds a small table for impromptu meals. Steps away, the main patio boasts a fully furnished kitchen—rotisserie grill, smoker, two-burner range, sink, and refrigerator—with a stone-slab table that seats 10 and a wide built-in bench surrounding a toasty fire pit.

A small terrace connects the lower level of the house with the garden, leading the eye across a tousled no-mow meadow through rough-bark tree trunks to Sheila's sanctuary—a Balinese pavilion furnished with white curtains and a cushioned daybed, perched alongside the tranquil pond.

At the low end of the property, hidden behind the guesthouse, is another room where Mendelsohn can lose herself in her knitting and crocheting. Just below and around a switchback, a two-person swing hangs from a stout oak branch. It offers an idyllic view to a pair of gracefully arching footbridges spanning the new stream.

Just as Van Atta was able to create a range of unique spaces for outdoor activities, her skill in plant composition adds personality to each room. Colorful flowers are introduced with a gentle hand: classic white iceberg roses underlaid with Santa Barbara daisies outside the main gate; puffy pastel hydrangeas framing the view from the bathtub. Everywhere else, flowers play a secondary role, taking a backseat to the quiet interplay of plant forms and foliage color. Van Atta enhanced the inherent charm of the site: "It was like putting touches of makeup on an already beautiful woman." ■



DREAM GARDEN TEAM

The following architects and contractors translated Sheila Mendelsohn's vision for her property into reality.

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