Private Paradise
Contemporary American Gardens
Charlotte M. Frieze
There wasn't a flat place in sight for a house, a pool, or a garden. The three-acre site was dramatic: a steep (2:1) slope with huge boulders and chaparral vegetation with south-facing views over the ocean. Susan Van Atta’s goal was to create a seemingly natural landscape that celebrated the character of the location and united the new contemporary house with the rocky slopes and native chaparral.

She and architect Jan Hochhauser “inserted” the house into the hillside. The main house, guest house, and artist studio were designed as separate structures that retain the slopes, creating flat outdoor spaces for the entry drive court and pool. The flat rooftops were transformed into a series of gardens linked together with a system of paths that twist and turn and climb through the rugged landscape. Nooks along the trails are filled with low-growing native plants to emphasize the concept that the chaparral is a garden.

Within the larger chaparral garden are small pocket gardens, each with an individual theme. A Ferny Seep flanking the front door comprises native ferns and delicate plants adapted to shady slopes and seeps, day-lighting water sources. Existing chaparral plants merge with Pacific Coast iris, Pacific wax myrtle (Myrica californica), mountain lilac (Ceanothus arboreus), and chalk dudleya (Dudleya pulverulenta).

For the Romero Canyon trail garden, Van Atta recreated a striking plant community that she came upon while hiking high in the foothills to the east. Varying in texture, the sparkling silvery plants include evergreen perennial white sage (Salvia apiana), chaparral yucca known as Our Lord's candle (Hesperoyucca whipplei), the broadleaf buckwheat, and multibranched white native chamise (Adenostoma fasciculatum) that dominate the chaparral, and the succulent, chalk dudleya.

If the roof gardens were not flat, no one would suspect that they were not on terra firma. The ornamental vents and skylights that pop up in the vegetation are, however, dead giveaways. For the roofs of the main house, guest house, and studio, Van Atta selected plants for extended bloom times and low water use. Two other roofs were planted with native grasses, including Canyon Prince wild rye (Leymus condensatus ‘Canyon Prince’). A medium-tall gray-blue evergreen, ‘Canyon Prince’ is only found in nature on a tiny island off the coast of San Miguel Island, the northernmost Santa Barbara Channel Island. The choice of plant color and texture was key to blending the gardens in with the native chaparral when viewed from a distance.

Chaparral Garden
Susan Van Atta
Van Atta Associates
Montecito, California
Architect
Jan Hochhouser, AIA

Photographs
Susan Van Atta (178 center, 179)
Diedre Waipol Photography (176, 178 left and right, 179)

Climate
SUNSET Western Garden Zone 24

Special considerations
Summer drought; fire hazard zone.

Existing conditions
Steep rocky site at the edge of natural chaparral vegetation. 3 acres of 2:1 or greater slope.
As lovely as the green roofs are, they were also designed to modulate the temperature within the house. The soil and plants insulate the roof from the heat retained by the dark rocks on the slope. The green roofs keep the buildings cool, reduce glare, slow storm water run-off, and protect the roof membrane.

In nature, the chaparral is adapted to fire. Although the winters are mild and wet, the summers are hot and dry. The shrubs growing on the mountains that surround Montecito are drought tolerant and have tough, thick evergreen foliage to reduce water loss.

As this rocky hillside is located in a high-fire hazard zone, the irrigated green roofs provide essential protection. In addition Van Atta designed a Firescape Garden on the slopes above the house. She stabilized the slopes above the house with a mulch of native stone and fire resistant low-growing perennials including sedums and echveria.

Preceding pages: The walkway from the parking area to the residence widens to create a limestone terrace. A steppingstone traverses a line of thyme punctuated with Festuca ovina glauca. Stone steps carved into an outcrop lead to the guest house.

Opposite far left: Three roof gardens bring the chaparral landscape into the architecture. This path from the bedroom level connects to the trail system on the property. Thyme flourishes between the flagstones; yellow-blooming Fremontodendron californica grows behind the sky-lights.

Opposite center: Steps leading to the Romero Canyon trail are made of rough-hewn sandstone from the house excavation. Chaparral yucca known as Our Lord’s candle (Hesperoyucca whipplei), multibranched, white native chamise (Adenostoma fasciculatum), and succulent, chalk duliedy re-create the foothills landscape.

Opposite right: To create the overlook known as the stone gazebo, a flat terrace was constructed at the base of two huge boulders. A stone bench is diminished by their huge presence. Lavender pride of Madeira (Echium candicans) frames the view.

Right: A level area was inserted into the slope to provide width for both path and plants. The decomposed granite Mediterranean walk works around olive trees, California iris, nepeta, and lavender en route from the artist studio to the residence.