

DESIGNING FOR DROUGHT

# LIVING WITH IT

What three landscape architects are doing about California's long dry spell—on the job and in their own gardens

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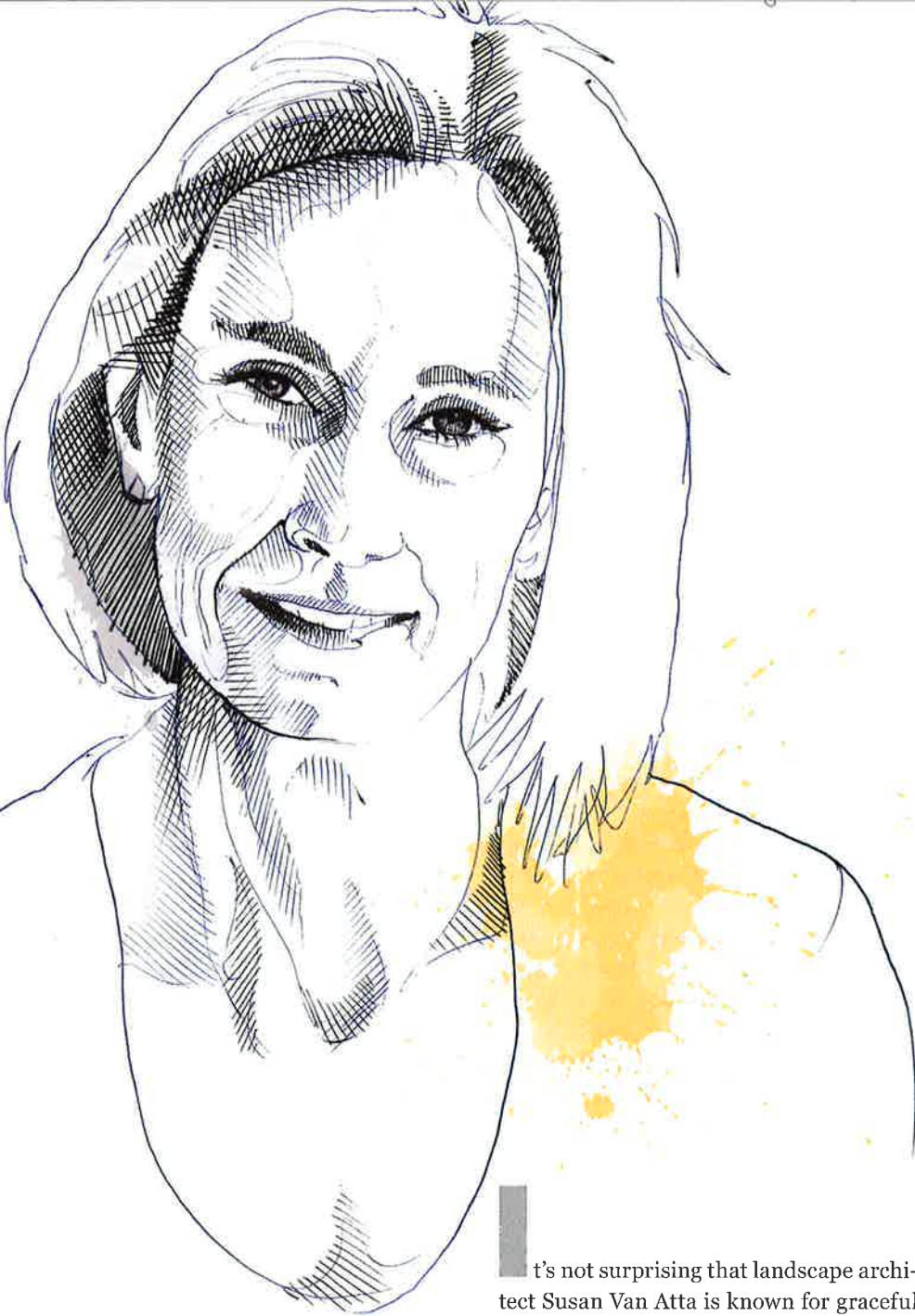
**N**o one in California is escaping the impact of the ongoing four-year drought. Then there are people like Susan Van Atta, Nora Harlow, and Christine O'Hara who get an extra wallop. They're landscape architects who have spent big chunks of their careers dealing with the state's summer-dry climate and periodic water shortages. Then they come home and face the same realities on a personal level—their lawns turning brown, dilemmas over which plants to save, decisions about how to design for the future.

The three live in different parts of the state, from the Bay Area to Southern California. All face the statewide mandate to reduce water consumption, along with local regulations that might be even stricter. They have come up with their own coping strategies for irrigating, selecting plants, and designing satisfying spaces appropriate for area and climate.

It's interesting to note that none are dismayed. O'Hara seems to speak for all when she says, "Drought is a great opportunity to rediscover design." Meaning, it's a time to think about what gardens should be like in a future of uncertain climate in California—and other regions also affected by drought.

In Van Atta's own hillside garden, just about everything is native or edible. In front, there's native grass. In back, more natives blur with the natural landscape.





**“I think of my garden as a laboratory”**

**SUSAN VAN ATTA**  
SANTA BARBARA, CA

It's not surprising that landscape architect Susan Van Atta is known for graceful climate-sensitive gardens. Since the 1970s she has lived and worked in and around Santa Barbara, absorbing its legacy of Mediterranean climate design (think lavender, citrus, native plants) as well as the devastating impact of droughts in a region with limited water supplies.

Van Atta says that water-wise design kicked in early in the area's history—long recognized for its blissful climate that welcomes plants from all over the world. She singles out the powerful influence of landscape architect Lockwood de Forest III for his recognition of the area's water limits and his boosterism of Mediterranean plants. In 1924 in the middle of a drought,

de Forest wrote in *Garden Magazine and Home Builder*, “The lawn as a foundation for a naturalistic garden scheme in Southern California is based on a false note.”

Early in Van Atta's career, as a student and environmental planner before turning to landscape architecture, she fell in love with California native plants. She was particularly attracted to the beauty of the area's wild landscape: the muted green and khaki of the chaparral and woodlands, punctuated by the bright bursts of spring color. She asked, “Why plant *Agapanthus* and *Rhaphiolepis* when there are so many beautiful wild plants available?”

Over the years Van Atta's designs became more nature-oriented—and water wise—as she created home gardens from the beach to the mountains, along with resorts, parks, and open spaces. One constant was to “bring out the potential of native plants for their beauty as well as their sustainability and their ability to create habitats for birds and butterflies.”

There's no better place to observe her trust in native plants than at her own home. A 1-acre landscape surrounds an energy-efficient, LEED-Platinum, contemporary-style house, designed by her husband, architect Ken Radtkey, and set into a Montecito hillside. She says, “I think of my own garden as a laboratory.” She began by trying out “a dozen of everything,” but was not happy with so much diversity. After several rounds of re-landscaping, she has simplified and “everything now is native or edible or both.”

Instead of relegating natives to the wilder edges of the property, as is often the case, Van Atta gave them center stage throughout the landscape. In front of the house *Agrostis pallens*, a native grass, edges an elegantly oval pool, valued for fire safety in a high-risk wildfire zone and much used by her family. Van Atta points out that the *A. pallens* sometimes

VAN ATTA'S  
QUICK TIPS

## DESIGNING FOR DROUGHT

Van Atta appreciates natives for more than their drought tolerance. She says, “Plant natives for their beauty. But use them as in nature. Don’t think of them individually and in isolation but in communities.” And she cautions that “the use of natives must be very informed.” California has some 6,000 native species, and most demand fairly specific conditions of soil, water, and light. Contrary to myth, natives are not always easy to grow, but in the right place many of them can succeed magnificently, creating a powerful sense of place.

When combining different plants, look for visual harmony as well as similar water requirements. For example, enhance the natural beauty of live oaks with natural companions, such as low-growing woodland plants, including native iris and ferns.

When considering replacing a grass lawn, keep in mind its value in a design—a clean expanse often offering the only visual relief in a garden. Instead of planting a mixed bag of various shrubs or perennials, look for choices that supply the same visual effect as a lawn—masses of yarrow, or meadow grasses like blue grama grass.

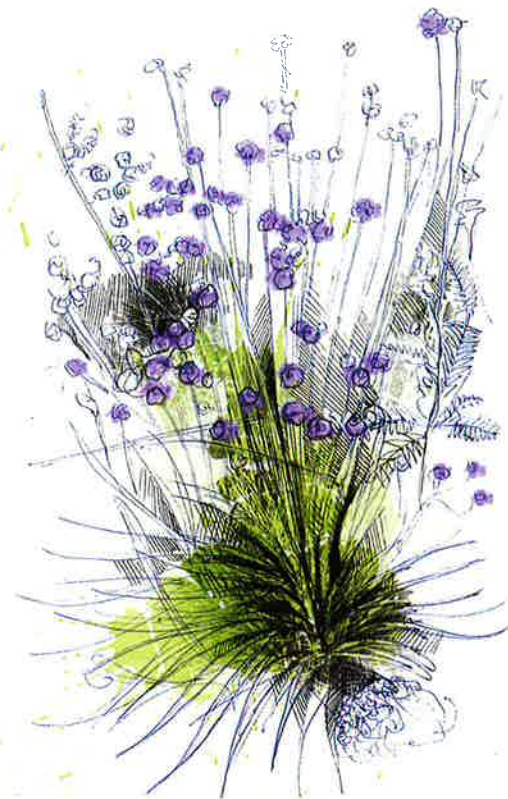
becomes spotty, and she now puts more trust in other native grasses, particularly blue grama (“let it grow tall and flower with its black flags”).

At the back of the house, the look is wilder. Native ferns (California polypody, Western sword fern, and others) and *Heuchera* were planted underneath native live oaks, which can’t tolerate summer irrigation. At the property’s dry edges, rambunctious *Romneya coulteri* (Matilija poppy) and rambling native *Lonicera subspicata* (Southern honeysuckle) create a transition to the adjacent chaparral.

Above the home’s second floor, an arced living roof drains and stores rain water in cisterns, which can be tapped for garden irrigation. On the roof are succulents (white stonecrop, ‘Dragon’s Blood’ sedum, and bluff lettuce) planted in a formal grid—not the usual pattern for California natives but visually effective. There’s also a smaller, lower living roof planted with *Carex praegracilis*, a short meadow sedge, edged with seaside daisy, sand strawberry, and red-flowering *Eriogonum grande* var. *rubescens* (red buckwheat).

The garden’s edible sections include deciduous fruit trees, citrus, and a classic Mediterranean combination of figs and ‘Provence’ lavender. Hillside plantings include a groundcover of *Fragaria vesca*, a native strawberry which produces miniature berries loaded with flavor; and shrubby *Ribes aureum* (golden currant), with yellow flowers in spring followed by orange-yellow berries that turn black in the fall when edible.

Van Atta says that the current drought has been rough on her garden, but the Santa Barbara area has been better prepared than it was during the prolonged 1987–92 dry spell. Water resources fell way short then, and lawn watering in the area was banned for 14 months, and there were restrictions on landscaping. Before normal



*Verbena lilacina* ‘De La Mina’ is a Harlow favorite for summer blooms in dry places.

rains returned, desperate local voters approved measures to link the area into the state water system and to build a desalination plant, which was soon mothballed but now is being reactivated.

Even with a drought-tolerant garden, Van Atta started to cut back on water in spring of 2014, aiming for the 30-percent reduction required by the local water agency. A number of plants continue to look good or even better than usual: sages, yarrow, Matilija poppy, ‘Ken Taylor’ rosemary, *Prunus ilicifolia* (hollyleaf cherry), toyon, *Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* ‘Skylark’. Van Atta says her established green roof looks better than ever now, and doesn’t require much water because of the shallow 4-inch soil depth—“It would be the last thing I would stop watering.”