

Billy Goodnick's Thoughts From the Garden of Ed(en)

Santa Barbara Bowl-tanical Garden?

By Billy Goodnick

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The Santa Barbara Bowl concert season is settling into a most excellent groove. Steely Dan and Alt-J got things rolling. Lin and I are looking forward to celebrating our whateverith anniversary to the sounds of Sharon Jones and the Dapp-Kings, June 7th. And I know I'll be delightfully distracted on the way to our seats, enjoying the new landscaping that arrived with the brand spanking new box office.



The locally quarried, sandstone-clad stage rises amidst coast live oaks

When the first glimmerings of the Bowl's master plan began 20 years ago, the committee invited landscape architect Susan Van Atta (Van Atta Associates, Inc) to submit a proposal. "Restoring native plant communities has been a passion of mine since I began my practice," Van Atta says. "My pitch was to approach the green spaces as a restoration of the natural oak woodland habitat."

That's what dominated our foothill canyons long before spandexed rockers cranked their Marshall stacks up to eeeleven. "The vision was to build on the setting so that the venue appeared to be set 'in nature.'" She got the gig and has been enhancing Santa Barbara's world renowned, open air venue ever since.



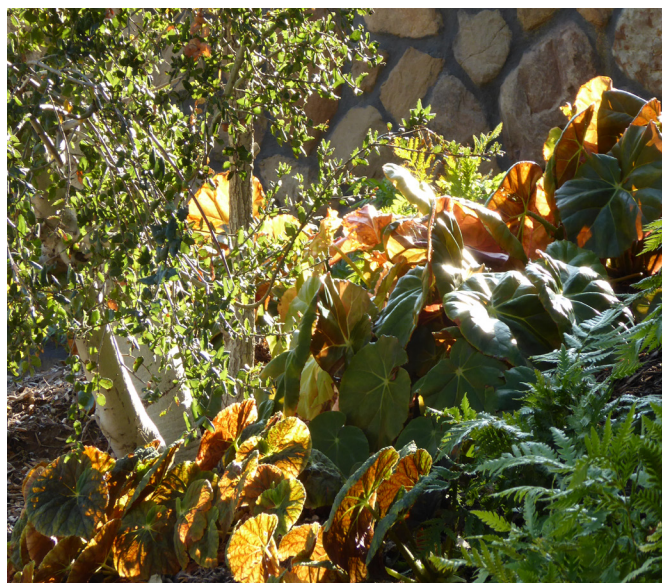
Narrow poplar trees mark the boundary between wheels and feet.

Everything's new beginning at the Milpas St. curb. Raised sandstone planters are the lead-in act, with ghostly white dudleyas, those succulent little drama queens. Playful ironwork designed and fabricated by David Shelton takes its cues from natural plant forms, like the gates at the new public restroom. (YES! There are toilets for early bird ticket buyers!!!)

I got the grand tour from Bowl board member and project manager Eric Lassen. "One of our highest priorities was separating pedestrians from vehicles. Depending on the artists and how much gear they haul, the parking lot can be a



Dudleyas, a native succulent, brighten the entrance.



Bold, luscious, coppery begonias thrive under oaks.

very busy and harsh space.” To delineate the boundary, a colonnade of poplar trees punctuates the spaces between new benches, street lamps and trash receptacles.

“To create enough space for the new building without giving up maneuvering area for tour busses and trucks, we acquired the property just north of us,” says Lassen. That’s where, from 1934 until 2005, Rudolph “Rudy” C. Ziesenhenné, a nationally recognized begonia innovator, researched, bred and sold more than 900 varieties of these prized plants. And begonias are foreign to the mostly native palette Van Atta introduced, groupings of one of the heartier varieties now mingle with the Californians.

I know you’ll be eager to grab an icy beer and get to the music, but savor the journey. Just before rounding the curve to the ticket takers and the vertical assault to your seat, a shady oak-dotted slope ends its Riviera descent. To make the most of every drop of precious moisture that might flow down the hillside, Van Atta wove sandstone cobble weirs between boulders to reduce erosion and slow runoff, allowing time for water to percolate into the soil. What currently looks like randomly placed green hair plugs are actually grassy sedge plants (*Carex* species), a shade tolerant, low-water, spreading plant that will eventually knit the surface soil together. Surprisingly drought resistant native ferns add subtle visual texture.



In dry shade, stone weirs slow run-off.

Just east of the oak canopy, the plant palette switches up. Instead of the harmonious mix of soft textured shade plants, chunky hunks of chalky blue-gray *Agave attenuata* ‘Nova’ squat in clusters a few feet from the bed’s edge.

Says Van Atta, “Rather than take a hardline natives-only approach, we stayed flexible. We needed something massive to mark the end of the woodland planting and the agave fit the bill, getting morning sun but tolerating some afternoon shade.” I love that it’s paired with wispy threads of Cedros Island verbena (*Verbena lilicina* ‘De la Mina’ – sounds like a princess in a fairytale.)

The Bowl is rich with our lovely, Santa Barbara sandstone, but that doesn't mean we can't drape it with a leafy garland once in a while. Van Atta found the ideal vine to ride the top of a large retaining wall. Roger's California grape (*Vitis californica* 'Roger's Red') thrives in partial shade, grows fast, tolerates dry summer conditions once established, provides food for humans and birds, and rewards you with smoldering red fall and winter color. (A few years ago, I started training one up a client's mature redwood tree and in the fall, bursts of brilliant red play hide and seek in the canopy.)



Big on contrast, chalky blue Agave 'Nova' mixes with carnation-scented verbena and 'Roger's Red' grape glows like molten lava.

Once through the ticket and security gates, you'll enter one of Van Atta's earlier projects, the Jerry Garcia oak dell. This cool canyon is a great place to relax and rendezvous with friends. Massive

boulders mix with flagstone paving and stone retaining walls that are just right for parking your keister. Behind some of these walls are stone lined swales that redirect



Carex tolerates boggy conditions yet needs no supplemental water in summer.



Artfully laid sandstone and a boulder forms a seat wall. Don't miss the leaf prints – but watch where you're going.



Special pavers let water percolate into the soil. Gaps between flagstone slabs keep oaks happy.



water off the hillside. A mature stand of *Carex* forms the living “shoreline.”

The design team didn't miss a detail. “Santa Barbara has seen many styles of stone masonry in its history, some of them recreated in the new project,” says Lassen. “Where the new entrance meets Milpas Street, we took our cue from the original sandstone walls at Rudy's property, which used angular, irregular stones with large mortar joints.” In other spots, masons emulated the 1936 WPA projects that gave birth to this scenic concert space. But in newer areas, Van Atta has more freedom.

If you come respectfully early – before the inevitable last minute stampede of folks who lingered over a last splash of IPA with dinner – allow a few minutes to meander along the leaf-print concrete paving. Just like snowflakes, each is unique.

Van Atta's practice is firmly grounded in sustainable design, so it's no surprise that the ground under your feet does more than just sit there looking pretty. Concrete pavers were selected to make the pedestrian “flooring” act like a sponge, rather than squandering rainfall by letting it run to the gutters. A deep bed of coarse rock supports bricks with wider than normal, gravel-filled spaces between them. The same approach is used with the loose setting of flagstone around the oaks at the Jerry Garcia terrace.

Unless our solar system rebels against the laws of physics and the sun stays up until the Bowl's 10pm sound curfew, you might not get to see this view. As I wrapped up my walkabout with Susan and Eric, we came down the service road to a spectacular slice of Santa Barbara's rich arboreal heritage.

As the sun sets slowly in the west, I extend my thanks and deep appreciation to the dedicated, volunteer board members and planning committee who continue to get it right on so many levels, keeping the Santa Barbara Bowl the local treasure it's always been.