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CENTRAL COAST MAGAZINE
THE LIVING WELL ISSUE
LIVE WELL
ON THE CENTRAL COAST
April Showers
BRING ECO-GARDENS
Local Tea
GLOBAL ROOTS
HOT SPRINGS, HEALING WATERS
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Green Gutters: "Here [in the U.S.] we *pipe* the rain so that you can't see the water coming down; but in Japan, they have "rain chains" where the water flows from cup to cup, so you see the water on this really pretty copper chain," says Susan Van Atta, who created a similar system above with beautiful copper runnels that stem from a cistern for the Hayward Design Center in Santa Barbara.

harvesting rain

April showers, as they say, bring May flowers. But here on the Central Coast, if we're lucky enough to have rain in April—or any other time for that matter—it also brings May*hem*. »

PHOTOS COURTESY VAN ATTA ASSOCIATES

"Every time it rains here, everything shuts down. The streets flood," says Susan Van Atta, founder of landscape architecture firm **Van Atta Associates in Santa Barbara,** who tells us water is the first thing she considers when designing a landscape site. Not only does she take in the topography to foresee where the runoff that contributes to flooding could occur, but she also analyzes the site to find ways to *keep* that precious water from running away—for use during our region's more common dry spells. "We live in an area with limited water and we need to be careful with our water use and take best advantage of it where it falls on the site to nourish the plant materials."

Strangely, in today's modernized world, the concept of *using* rainwater, in place of sprinklers and hoses, is a foreign one. "It's very common to regard rainwater as a nuisance that needs to be gotten off the site as quickly as possible. And so it's put into downspouts and pipes and sent to a storm drain system," Van Atta explains, citing the magnitude and complexity of the infrastructure involved in channeling our rainwater away.

But, she says, we're discovering that there really is no *away* anymore. "It's the ocean. It's our environment," Van Atta claims. "Cumulatively, with all the water being taken from new hard surfaces and newly built roofs, the storm water infrastructure [drainage, creeks, pipes, and boxes, created or augmented to get water off a site] is getting overloaded." The mounting runoff from these manmade water channels (now strictly regulated in new developments) is opening the floodgates to pollution, flooding, erosion, diminished groundwater, and habitat loss. Aside from these potential risks, Van Atta says that our typical attitude toward water additionally closes our minds to a well of opportunity.

"When you plan your landscape around taking best advantage of water that falls on your site, it reduces the volume of water that leaves your site, nourishes your landscape, and the water gets cleaned." She refers to the natural process of purification that occurs when rain lands where it should—on the soil. The sponge-like surface absorbs nutrients and acts as a water filter, while also feeding the plants and filling the water features in your yard with free water.

With a degree in Environmental Studies from UCSB and an early career in land-use planning, Van Atta went back to school at Cal Poly to get a degree in Landscape Architecture, what she calls the "proactive side" of land-use issues. Combining her expertise, the 2006 Santa Barbara "Green Award" winner is anxious to attune often skeptical clients to the multiple benefits of embracing rain. She says that often when she brings up the idea of using the rainwater and filtering it naturally rather than bringing in pipes and infrastructure, people are opposed, "Just because it's different."

> ***"It's very common to regard rainwater as a nuisance that needs to be gotten off the site as quickly as possible."***

But, in reality, it's much easier and more natural to use rain than to make it disappear. "I think most of us who live on the Central Coast do really like rain because it's a special event. But at the same time, we regard it as just hitting our homes and landscapes and we have this fear that it's going to damage them or something. I think that turning that around and *celebrating* what it really does for us is helpful overall."

Van Atta says there are probably hundreds of ways to celebrate rainfall—from bioswales to rain chains—depending on your site, but that all contribute to a flourishing, beautiful garden, a healthy environment, and—most importantly—your happiness. "I think living with nature is a more delightful way to live and it definitely can be healthier. For a lot of people, their landscape becomes a source of guilt and work. Whereas, if you design a landscape that works more with natural cycles, it can be more of a source of joy." Find the right rainwater garden for your site by contacting Van Atta at (805) 730-7444 or *http://va-la.com.*

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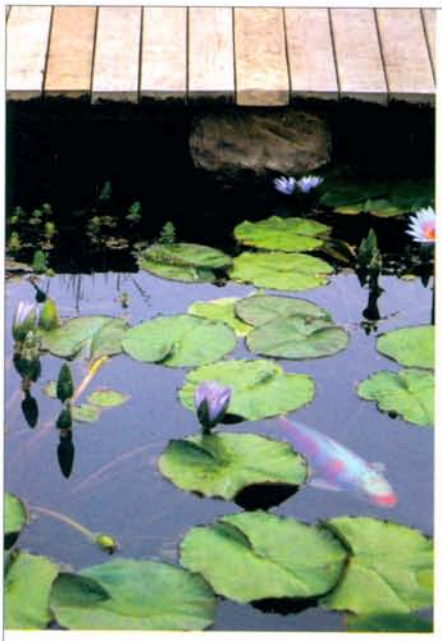
Green Roofs: There are many benefits to a green roof, but Van Atta says, "They're beautiful, number one." As in this Park Lane garden in Montecito (picturing the roof garden, with second story in background and red skylight structure at center), she says these natural roofs help integrate your home into the environment while also absorbing and cleaning runoff. The largely urban movement toward green roofs is just starting in Southern California, Van Atta says (though she has been working on them since the late '80s), because of their ability to insulate (and lower your energy bill); increase property value; lengthen the life of your roof; and give a natural look to dull roof structures and tiles.Van Atta says with new technology, green roofs need not be heavy either—a mere three inches of new lightweight soils make these projects much more feasible.



Biofilters: Using living microorganisms, biofilters capture and clean harmful chemicals or silt from surface runoff. Van Atta says you can channel rain water into a pond, like the one shown here at a Hope Ranch home, where the biofiltration makes it habitable for fish and other species.

Bioswales: Instead of a concrete swale, which simply hastens water off a site and out of *sight*, Van Atta says vegetated swales like these lush plantings at the Casa Nueva Building in Santa Barbara slow the water's flow to maximize the time it spends in your landscape, which aids in filtration of pollutants.