

The front of Coyote House with Californian native *Verbena lilacina* 'De la Mina' in the foreground.

# Perfect blend

When designing her own garden, considering the demands of its location came as second nature to sustainability expert Susan Van Atta

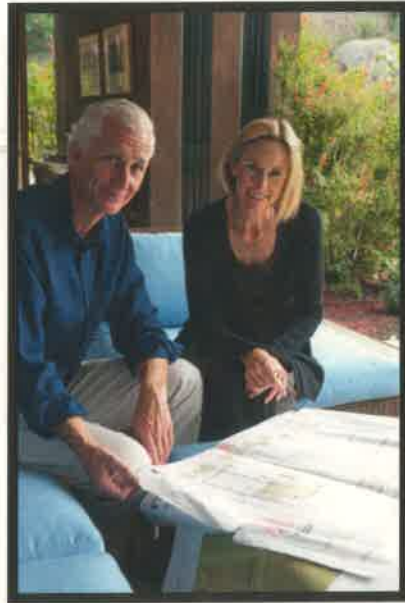
WORDS CAROLINE BECK | PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREA JONES



**H**ow many of us dream of buying a parcel of land and creating our own home and garden exactly the way we want it? In Britain, where land is scarce and prices high, this often remains just a pipe dream, but in America you are more likely to be able to turn such a dream into reality. Susan Van Atta and Ken Radtkey, a landscape architect and architect who live in Santa Barbara, California, had the expertise, the energy and the desire to do just that. In 1995, they found a plot of just over an acre with a little house, a “tear-down” as Susan calls it, in the hills above Santa Barbara, and bought it intending to move in and start work straightaway. The demands of clients and a young family, however, meant that their plans stayed on the drawing board for eight years. But the wait was worth it. “In many ways it was good,” they agree, “because it gave us time to focus on what we needed and wanted. It also meant that we knew about the land, what would grow and what wouldn’t.” Today, anyone visiting Coyote House, the stylish home that Ken and Susan built to replace the old one, would agree that their patience paid off.

The couple’s work and family were not the only reasons why the project was slow to start, however. There were other practical considerations they had to

**ABOVE LEFT** The lower green roof is gradually being colonised by drought-tolerant plants. **TOP CENTRE** The citrus orchard is entirely irrigated with recycled waste water from the house. **ABOVE** The upper green roof, overlooked by swing seats in the pergola, is planted with drought-tolerant *Sedum spurium* ‘Dragon’s Blood’, *S. album* and *Dudleya formosa* (bluff lettuce). **RIGHT** These metal “rain chains” not only make a beautiful feature, they also carry rainwater from the roof to irrigate the garden. **CENTRE RIGHT** Evergreen native *Quercus agrifolia* (coast live oaks), provide welcome shade above a winding path. **TOP RIGHT** Ken and Susan review the plans. **FAR RIGHT** A biró bath surrounded by *Verbena officinalis* ‘De la Mina’ makes a charming focal point at the front of the house.



deal with. The property is in a high-risk area for forest wildfires, added to which it sat beside a large stand of highly flammable eucalyptus trees. "I was anxious about them being so near the house," Susan recalls, "and they also shaded everything." So, after negotiations with their neighbour, they took down the trees but instead of chipping them, they used the wood to make items for the house, including the front door, the stairs, some bookshelves and a dining table. It was an entirely appropriate solution, in keeping with the couple's desire for their house to have an indoor-outdoor feel. Their design also included a wide, airy veranda and a roof garden of drought-tolerant species, contributing to the sense that the garden is a continuation of the house.

When it came to planting the garden, Susan chose species that are either edible or indigenous to the area. The temperature rarely dips below 70 degrees Fahrenheit in this part of the country, even in winter, so because water is at a premium she has planted blueberries, blackberries and a fruit orchard of lemons, limes, ►





The pergola at the top of the house is roofed with solar panels to provide shade as well as energy.



## Garden guide

### GARDEN ORIENTATION

South facing.

**SOIL TYPE** Red clay with few naturally occurring nutrients.

**SPECIAL FEATURES** The house incorporates solar panels and green roofs, and the garden is irrigated with captured rainwater and grey water from the house.

**GARDEN DESIGN** Susan Van Atta, landscape architect, [va-la.com](http://va-la.com). Ken Radtkey, founder of Blackbird Architects, [bbird.com](http://bbird.com).



**ABOVE** This variety of blue agave (*Agave tequilana*) is grown in Mexico to make tequila.

**THIS PICTURE** The wall by the stairs is dotted with air plants, which need no soil to survive as they gain their nutrition from the air.



ILLUSTRATION SCOTT JESSOP

peaches and figs close to but slightly below the level of the house. In keeping with the couple's sustainable principles, the orchard is irrigated entirely by grey water from the house that is gravity fed through an underground pipe. When it does rain, usually in the winter, it comes down with gusto so all the gutters are strategically placed to conserve the water by channelling it into a series of underground cisterns. All the green waste is composted and the family also keeps a few chickens to provide high-nitrogen manure. Towards the periphery, Susan wanted the garden to blend with the surrounding landscape so she planted native species of trees, such as oaks and willows, which are tolerant of both searing heat and bright sunlight.

This idea of the landscape being integral to the garden is one of the fundamental differences between British and American design, as in Britain we relinquish our high walls, fences and hedges very reluctantly. But a garden that is able to extend visually into the wider view often feels much bigger and more complete and Coyote House uses this sleight of hand to great effect, the garden seamlessly blending with the limitless panorama all the way to the Pacific ocean. ■