

# SIMPLY *Serene*

Step out your back door into a personal sanctuary by creating an Asian-inspired courtyard designed for relaxing and entertaining with ease.

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**OPPOSITE:** The expansive fireplace in Lori Gentile and Joe Greco's California courtyard replicates the look of an interior wall while screening the outdoor kitchen from view. **THIS PHOTO:** A generously sized cushioned teak ottoman doubles as a coffee table.

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s an interior designer, Lori Gentile enjoys transforming properties into harmonious retreats. So when she and husband Joe Greco bought their Encinitas, California, home, she could easily see beyond the bland landscape that greeted them. A cramped deck and an unwieldy patch of cacti did little to entice the couple outdoors. "My goal was to create a modern Zen atmosphere that would tantalize all the senses," she says. "I like to incorporate a touch of Zen in every project I do because it exudes tranquility."

## Shades of Serenity

With the help of landscape designer Melanie Jauregui, Lori created a quiet courtyard in a U-shape nook between the garage and two sides of the house. The

space caters to comfort with a living room, dining area, and cooking zone. "Designing multiple levels was necessary with the sloping lot, but a challenge because of a large ficus tree," Lori says. "I didn't want to lose it, so we designed the levels around it."

Nature's subtle hues provide a fitting muse for the courtyard's soothing color palette of green and gray punctuated by black and chocolate-brown accents. "I didn't want any colors taking over Mother Nature," Lori says. "I also selected a simple color palette because I

**BELOW:** Lori and Joe relax in an all-weather woven chair and ottoman for two, placed where they can enjoy the idyllic fountain. **OPPOSITE:** A statue of Quan Yin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy and compassion, imparts an air of solitude over the koi pond. Two built-in planters of foxtail fern (*Asparagus meyeri*) bring the garden to the water's edge, softening the stone.





Lori and Joe's outdoor courtyard invites relaxation with distinct living and dining areas tied together with a subtle flooring of gray porphyry pavers. The sturdy surface often doubles as an impromptu dance floor during dinner parties.



**TOP:** A ficus tree, salvaged from the couple's previous landscape, and a pot of corkscrew rush (*Juncus effusus* 'Spiralis') lend sculptural intrigue in the outdoor kitchen. **ABOVE:** A mesmerizing collage of rocks and shells turns an ordinary concrete seat wall into a work of art. Inspired by Lori and Joe's love of surfing, the design evokes the undulating movement of waves.

wanted the space to segue from serene to sensual with a simple changing of pillows or accessories."

In keeping with the earthy color theme, Lori unified the courtyard's living and dining rooms with soft gray flooring made of porphyry pavers, a natural volcanic stone that complements the surrounding neutral hues.

Even surfaces such as concrete steps and walls exude an exotic look thanks to artistry with beach pebbles and shells. "You can get a lot of design out of using just two materials," Jauregui says. "On the steps, we created a 2-inch gap at the bottom of each riser to accommodate loose pebbles, yet it's functional because there's plenty of landing space for feet." Lori also dressed up a concrete seat wall with a mural of seashells and beach pebbles in a pattern that simulates undulating waves. "My husband and I love to surf, so we thought that would make a fitting motif," she says.

### Comforts of Home

To create an inviting ambience, Lori approached the courtyard design much as she does interior spaces. In the living room, a clean-lined, contemporary fireplace made of pumice stone, granite, and black glass beckons guests with its dramatic scale and crackling warmth.



**THIS PHOTO:** Made of aluminum, teak, and granite, the dining table sets a sophisticated stage for outdoor meals. Container plantings of horsetail (*Equisetum hyemale*) and burgundy *Phormium* 'Bronze Baby' create background drama and a sense of enclosure.

"Our goal was to create the feeling of a room," Jauregui says. "The wall helps continue that sense of enclosure outdoors." The cushioned teak furniture is arranged in front of the fireplace's expansive opening.

The fireplace wall's dimensions also solved a critical design challenge—where to put the fresh-air kitchen. Jauregui didn't want the kitchen's utilitarian nature to disrupt the courtyard's serenity. "Our solution was to locate it behind the fireplace wall where it could be screened from view," she says. The small yet efficient cooking zone caters to convenience with a handy sink and professional-grade grill. "My husband I are both full-blooded Italians, so to us, food is love," Lori says. "And there's nothing better than close friends and family sharing a meal together. It doesn't take much to achieve this, so we kept the kitchen's amenities simple."

Guests often gather in the nearby dining room, serenaded by the trickling tempo of a fountain that spills into a koi pond. "The sound of water has tremendous healing power, so it was important to me to make it a focal feature," says Lori, who fashioned the fountain's wooden screen backdrop with ready-made lattice panels from a local lumber supply store. "I played with a few designs and learned that if I superimposed them slightly, I could achieve the texture I wanted. The texture seduces the eye and makes even the simplest design intriguing."

These simple yet striking details bring Lori's vision of serenity full circle, creating an alluring oasis for everyday living. "We practically live outside—from the first cup of morning coffee to afternoon sunbathing to dinner under the stars," Lori says. "When we want to relax, we come here."

For more information, see Resources on page 111.

**RIGHT:** Lori fashioned an airy backdrop for the scored-concrete fountain with two styles of ready-made panels found at a local lumber supply store.

## Create a Zen Space

Less is more in Lori Gentile and Joe Greco's tranquil courtyard, where a simple palette of materials offers a welcome respite from the hectic pace of daily life. Invite serenity into your outdoor haven with these tips from landscape designer Melanie Jauregui.

- **Think geometrically.** Start with a simple foundation that features predominantly straight lines. "A geometric look is quiet in feel, and the whole point of a Zen space is to quiet the mind," Jauregui says. "If you have too many contrived curves in the landscape, it disrupts that feel." Use curves sparingly as focal points. In Lori and Joe's fountain area, the straight lines of a lattice screen set off the curvaceous silhouette of a statue.
- **Harmonize hardscapes.** Repeating elements in multiple rooms is the key to creating cohesion. For example, granite appears in the fireplace hearth and flanking pilasters as well as in the dining room table and kitchen countertops. "For simplicity, use no more than three types of flooring," Jauregui says. In Lori and Joe's outdoor space, wood, stone, and pebble floors define the rooms while maintaining a sense of unity.
- **Simplify the planting palette.** Opt for five to seven plant varieties to create continuity. "You don't want your focal point, such as the Quan Yin statue we used in Lori's garden, to get lost in a sea of plantings," says Jauregui, who used plants sparingly as accents. Foundation plantings such as a mature ficus tree and birds-of-paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*) hug the courtyard's perimeter to allow views of the fireplace and fountain.
- **Favor foliage over flowers.** High-voltage blooms might energize the eye, but in a Zen-infused space, the goal is to calm it. So Jauregui chose tropical foliage plants that echo the serene hues of nature, such as Mexican weeping bamboo (*Otatea acuminata aztecorum*), elephant's ears (*Colocasia*), and *Cyperus papyrus*. "Dark green is the predominant color in nature, so it goes well with just about anything," Jauregui says.

