

Sunset

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Sun gardens

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Hardy water lillies float in a small fountain near the entrance to the house; the sound of water trickling through the stone orb makes the feature a favorite with birds.

Sun gardens

Fountains, perennials, and grasses make Mediterranean-style plantings look at home among California's golden hills

BY SHARON COHOON PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS J. STORY



Italian cypress, olive trees, and other classical Mediterranean plants blend with 'Hopley's' purple oregano, white 'Iceberg' roses, golden coreopsis, and red 'Garnet' penstemon in a casual planting near the entry.

A HOUSE NEEDS TO CONNECT with its natural surroundings to feel truly at home. That's the case even when the house is a Mediterranean villa, like the one pictured on these pages. Garden designer Susan Lamont could have surrounded the Healdsburg, California, home of Ross and Gillian Stromberg with a typically Tuscan landscape of clipped boxwood hedges, but those might have made the property look as artificial as a stage set. Instead, she chose the right plants to successfully bridge the gap between the Strombergs' Old World-style house and the younger, wilder landscape around it. By doing so, she also created gardens that stand up to the valley's sun.

In a courtyard left of the entry, Lamont blended Mediterranean classics such as Italian cypress and olive trees with California natives such as ceanothus. The Boston ivy covering the walls and the 'Iceberg' roses could be found at a villa in Tuscany. But the style is Western—more free-form than geometric.

To visually connect home to hills, Lamont chose ornamental grasses. She introduced a few in the courtyard; farther out she planted them en masse to echo the golden shoulders of the surrounding slopes. Ornamental grasses change with the season—green in spring, gold in summer—just like the ones that cover the hills. "That's what makes them such great transitional plants," Lamont says. The way they reflect the sun is another asset, as is how they move in wind. "Because they're wavy and breezy and soft, the grasses make the garden feel a bit wild," she adds. One caveat: Their showy plumes can turn into seed factories and make the plants highly invasive. For this reason, Lamont chooses them carefully. Which grasses are problematic depends on where you live.

To give the grasses some more punch, Lamont added small-flowered perennials that you might expect to find in a meadow, such as asters, coreopsis, globe mallow, and toadflax. "Herbaceous perennials like asters are such fun," she says. "They disappear, you forget about them, and then they pop up again like a surprise gift."

Ornamental grasses change with the season—green in spring, gold in summer—just like the ones that cover the hills

The Strombergs wanted roses in their landscape too. And because Cabernet Sauvignon grapes grow on their property, Lamont found this an easy request to honor. "Roses at the end of grapevine rows are a common sight throughout the valley," she says, "so seeing the two together in the landscape here seems natural."

Thanks to the transition the gardens now provide, the Tuscan-style house seamlessly connects with the oak-covered hills of California's wine country. Instead of looking like it would rather be in Italy, the garden seems perfectly at home.

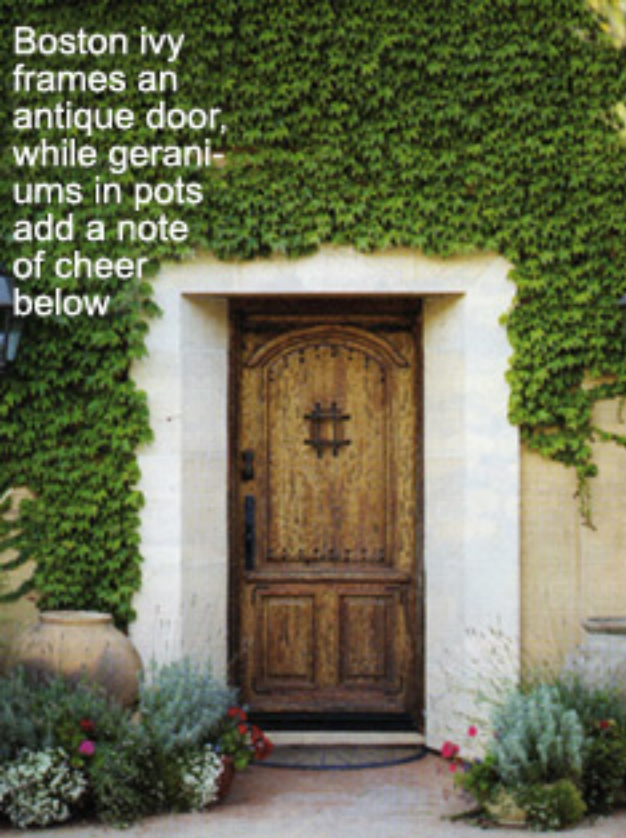
DESIGN Susan Collier Lamont, Lamontscapes, Santa Rosa, CA (www.lamontscapes.com or 707/569-9922); Jay Tripathi and Peter Estournes, Gardenworks, Healdsburg, CA (www.gardenworks-inc.com or 707/857-2050) >114

The plants

- 1. Feather reed grass** *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* has a vertical growth habit and showy seed heads.
- 2. Cabernet Sauvignon grapes** A cluster from the Strombergs' vineyards shows the seeded, pearl-size grapes in various stages of ripeness.
- 3. 'Moonshine' yarrow** The sunny hues of this Mediterranean perennial complement the violet-blue spikes of catmint (*Nepeta*).
- 4. 'Sally Holmes' A** vigorous white rose, it blooms in huge clusters.
- 5. 'Hot Cocoa'** This floribunda rose bears red blossoms.
- 6. *Pennisetum orientale*** A pretty, midsize (2 ft.) grass explodes with showy pink to white plumes.
- 7. *Sedum telephium*** Flower clusters open purplish pink and age to brownish maroon.
- 8. *Coleonema pulchrum* 'Sunset Gold'** Yellow foliage distinguishes this heathlike shrub with tiny pink flowers.
- 9. *Aster cordifolius* 'Little Carlow'** Deep violet-blue flowers cluster atop plants that grow 3 to 4 ft. tall.
- 10. Jerusalem sage** (*Phlomis fruticosa*) Despite the showiness of its whorls of golden flowers, this Mediterranean perennial is reliably heat- and drought-tolerant.
- 11. *Berberis thunbergii* 'Rose Glow'** The bronzy red Japanese barberry colors up best in full sun.
- 12. *Coreopsis grandiflora* 'Sunray'** Like the rest of the sunflower family, this bright yellow perennial blooms all summer on little water.







Boston ivy frames an antique door, while geraniums in pots add a note of cheer below




Swing seating under an oak is inviting on warm days.



Terra cotta jars are stately accents



'Paprika' yarrow and 'Walker's Low' catmint edge a secluded seating area

A photograph of a garden with a Spanish-style house in the background. The house has a tiled roof and a small cupola. The garden is filled with various plants, including tall grasses in the foreground and a variety of flowers and shrubs. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Shimmery plumes of evergreen *miscanthus* arch over blue flowered 'Walker's Low' catmint and pink *linaria* (foreground) in a border near the house. Just beyond them clumps of blue fescue, pink-flowered society garlic and feathery *Pennisetum orientale* edge the lawn; wisteria grows behind.

Elements of a Sun Garden

Landscapes that look good in the sun are designed to stand up to it as well as celebrate it.

SHIMMER Fine-textured plants such as grasses reflect the sun brilliantly. Because they are used extensively in this garden, the whole landscape seems to dance with light.

SUMMER BLONDNESS The garden acknowledges that blond is the natural color of summer in California. The tawney flower plumes of *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* (feather reed grass) match the amber hues of the hills.

DROUGHT-RESISTANT PLANTS Most of the plants in the Strombergs' garden are moderate water users, even the shrub roses. "they're tougher than people think," Lamont says. The ones you find in the Sierra foothills are centuries-old examples: "They've survived all this time on rainfall alone."

SHADE The best way to enjoy the sun is from a shaded location. The Strombergs' mature oaks shelter outdoor living areas.

PERMEABLE HARDSCAPE Every drop of rain that falls in this thirsty part of the country ought to go in the land, Lamont says. That's one reason she used gravel throughout the garden.

SMALL-SCALE WATER FEATURES Because water is a precious resource, using it respectfully in the garden is a tradition. "Something lavish would have been out of character here," Lamont says.

EMPTY CONTAINERS In a hot climate, planted pots are hard to maintain, but empty ones look great.