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Fall/Winter 2009



Designing dreams

Los Altos resident re-creates
French Country living

Interior laughs

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J. Gilbert Smith History House

A Los Altos Town Crier Publication

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Cover story Page 6 Building dreams

Los Altos resident Abigail Ahrens, who has designed more than 100 properties, recently finished her French Country home.

Traveling in time Page 15

A visit to the J. Gilbert Smith History House in Los Altos offers a trip through the decades.



Scent of California Page 19

If California had a scent, it would have to be the Cleveland sage, hummingbird sage or white sage.

Money plant Page 21

Perennial kale produces nutrient-dense food year-round, is easy to propagate and requires little care.



Design with humor Page 25

Decorating with a sense of humor can lighten your mood and make your home a happy place.

Unique spaces Page 30

A great way to design a garden or update existing yard space is to create spaces that serve specific functions in your lifestyle.



Open pollination Page 33

While growing tomatoes from seed may take a few extra months, the benefits are numerous.

Hydrangea secrets Page 36

The secret to healthy and prolific hydrangea plants is pruning the bush back in the fall.



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138 Main Street, Los Altos, CA 94022
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Upcoming Magazines

Living in Los Altos

Publishes: September 16, 2009

Home for the Holidays

Publishes: November 18, 2009

Circulation 16,500. Mailed directly to households in Los Altos, Los Altos Hills and to selected areas of Mountain View. Hundreds of subscribers receive the Town Crier in neighboring communities as well as out-of-state. The Town Crier can be purchased at newsstands in Los Altos, Los Altos Hills, Palo Alto and Mountain View.

Cover photo: A checkerboard of grass and stone pavers makes a dramatic statement in the front of the stone entrance to Abigail Ahren's Los Altos home.

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Designing dreams

Los Altos woman develops more than 100 properties



PHOTOS BY ELLIOTT BURR/TOWN CRIER

Abigail Ahrens' French Country home in Los Altos, above, was inspired by 18th-century Provence with a touch of Paris. Napoleon reigns in the kitchen, right, and stars in the painting above the sink.

By Carolyn Snyder
Special to the Town Crier

Abigail Ahrens calls herself a romantic and a “builder of dreams.” But she’s also a real estate agent and home designer whose Los Altos business, The Abigail Company, has developed more than 100 properties locally.

Perhaps the one dearest to her heart is the French Country house she just built for herself close to downtown. It’s a stellar example of the work of the Residences Romantiques arm of her business.

“I’ve always had a passion for land. ... It’s like a blank canvas,” said Ahrens, who studied to become an art teacher. “I start with nothing but a dream.”

As the dream takes shape, she gathers a team.

“Doing a house is like a startup company. You need a board of directors,” she said. “My clients put me on their board and give

Continued on Page 8





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so much of themselves, their dreams, hopes, fears. I'm like the real Dear Abby."

Ahrens has designed and developed homes for 30 years and estimates that her younger daughter, Areli, lived in 13 houses by the time she was 16.

"She lived in the perpetual 'model home' as I acquired and redid them and placed them for sale as a single mom," Ahrens said.

Today, Areli lives in a mom-designed home in San Jose.

Ahrens' older daughter, Gregg Ann Herrern, is her partner in The Abigail Company. Ahrens has two sons, Brock, a high school principal in Wilmington, N.C., and Seath, who lives in Scotts Valley and works for DreamWorks.

The land where Ahrens' new home sits was the original site of the Neutra House, which the city of Los Altos moved to Hillview Avenue to preserve and reuse. That modern California house has little in common with the



ELLIOTT BURR/TOWN CRIER

The reproduction of an 18th-century fireplace was cast from ground limestone and features a herringbone-brick interior.

house Ahrens built.

Her inspiration came from 18th-century Provence with a touch of Paris. The interior represents a lifetime of collecting.

"Anything historic catches my eye," Ahrens said.



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DESIGNING DREAMS

“Europe is a love of mine.”

The design took six months, but she spent two years hunting for exterior architectural details, such as shutters and windows from Paris, chimney tops, timbers and front door. The roof tiles were reclaimed from an old building in the Dordogne region of France, better known for its foie gras.

On her “team” were contractor Ron Weidman of Los Altos, Cheryl Driver of CK Design Group in Menlo Park and Kimberly Larzelere of KL Kitchen Studio, also in Menlo Park.

Pear trees are espaliered along the driveway leading to the house, which faces a stone courtyard and fountain. The eye is drawn to a white marble statue of a woman with wheat sheaves, representing autumn.

“Ahrens’ means to glean wheat,” Ahrens said.

A checkerboard of grass and stone pavers makes a dramatic statement in front of the stone entrance, where a 200-year-old fruitwood door, probably from Provence, swings open to another world.

The limestone front-door surround, hand-carved by Ake, features an oval medallion of a boy playing a fife. It was copied from an antique drawer knob (a porcelain cameo over bronze) that Ahrens installed with the rest of her collection in the master bath.

A pair of Paris ladies’ boudoir cabinets in the entry serve as repositories for coats.

“They’re in a color we’d call pickled pumice,” Ahrens said and



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The hood over the dual-fuel Lacanche commercial stove is a copy of an original painting of Napoleon crowning Josephine.

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Abigail Ahren's front yard sports a stone courtyard and fountain. The 200-year-old fruitwood door opens into the entryway.

ELLIOTT BURR/
TOWN CRIER

Continued from Page 9
adorned with carved bow knots and ribbons and cameos of mothers and children.
Hanging alongside them is an original dog portrait by

Thierry Poncelet, who has been called a “paintings conservator” because he has taken old English portraits and replaced the faces with those of dogs who seem so like people
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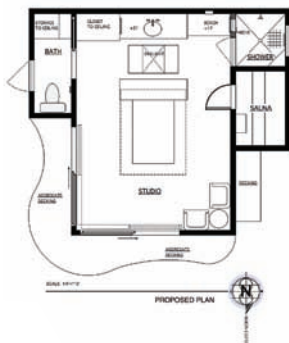
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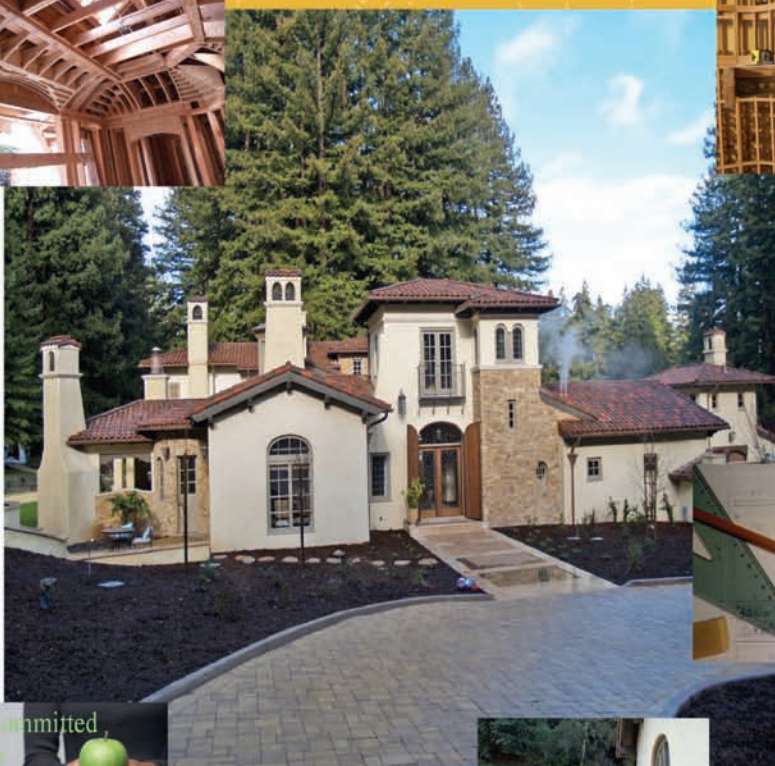
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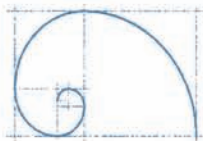
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DESIGNING DREAMS

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that they've earned him international acclaim.

Another Poncelet hangs in the laundry room, which is a special haven for Ahrens' Yorkshire terriers, Paris and Bone Apart. Here you'll find their beds and designer duds. There's even the gown that Paris wore to a wedding.

The laundry-room floor is composed of flat, antique roof tiles, with a "baseboard" of colorful ceramic tiles. Because of the elegant walnut cabinetry, the only clues that it's a laundry room are the washer and dryer.

Walnut parquet floors in a Versailles chateau pattern are in the entry, with hand-scraped and rubbed walnut floors are in the living room.

The wood-paneled living room could have been transported from France. The two front windows imported from Paris boast the original ornate iron grillwork. Wood case-ments and frames on the other windows have been finished to match the pair.

A reproduction of an 18th-century European fireplace



ELLIOTT BURR/TOWN CRIER

Los Altos resident Abigail Ahrens spent two years designing and building a home that echoes design philosophy and romantic nature.

commands attention. It was cast from ground limestone and features a herringbone-brick interior.

Driver calls the color of the living room "burnished acid green." It forms the perfect background for the botanical lithographs and other objets d'art that Ahrens has collected.

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Comfy chairs are upholstered in rich fabrics – no two chairs the same – and the draperies are a luscious European damask velvet chenille.

Napoleon reigns in the kitchen. A silhouette of his hat, in wrought iron, is a feature of the chandelier over the zinc-topped island. Salvador copied an original painting by Jacques-Louis David of Napoleon crowning Josephine onto the hood over the dual-fuel Lacanche commercial stove from France.

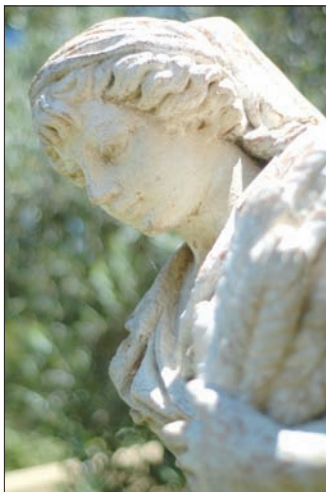
The inspiration for the kitchen décor came from a hat Ahrens purchased at a Paris flea market years ago.

“I was told it had been worn by Napoleon, and it’s fun to believe that’s true,” she said.

The hat was the beginning of her collection of things Napoleonic – all proudly displayed in bookshelves on either side of the refrigerator.

What refrigerator? Oh, it’s built into an armoire with carved escargot feet. In fact, two side-by-side Sub-Zero refrigerators occupy the space. Open one of the bottom drawers of the armoire and there’s the ice cream.

Larzelere designed the kitchen units to look like antique



ELLIOTT BURR/TOWN CRIER

The front yard features a white marble statue of a woman with wheat sheaves representing autumn.

furniture. Period tools and techniques. Countertops are honed Nero Marquina marble, floors are Beaumaniere limestone.

Recycled chestnut beams from Pennsylvania lend Old World charm to the room, where a French farm table provides ample seating for Ahrens’ family and friends. There’s also a cozy sitting area by the fireplace.

Doors open to the backyard, where a lap pool reflects the sun. Pool equipment is concealed by a chaumiere roche (stone cottage), or bonbonniere (snug little dwelling). It has an outdoor fireplace where guests can gather.

Speaking of guests, the guest powder room is something to behold. Walls and ceiling are covered by an 18th-century-style French toile fabric called Vues de Paris. A motif from the wallpaper was used as the pattern for the hand-carved

wood adorning the marble vanity.

Ahrens has created a home that echoes her romantic nature and her design philosophy.

“Enchanting homes add to the fiber of the community,” Ahrens said. “Imbuing them with history gives a sense of place, a permanence that’s truly home.” 🍷

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Traveling back in time with a visit to the J. Gilbert Smith History House

By Ya-an Chan

Special to the Town Crier

There is nothing extravagant about the J. Gilbert Smith History House, a permanent exhibit of the Los Altos History Museum. The 104-year-old redwood farmhouse adjacent to the Los Altos main library has clean lines and sturdy construction, but it's far from fancy.

Built in 1905, the Craftsman-style home is reminiscent of a simpler era, when a thriving apricot orchard surrounded it. Today, it is a piece of Los Altos history, purchased by the city in 1954 and designated a local Historical Landmark and a California State Point of Historical Interest in 1987

Continued on Page 16



COURTESY OF COLLECTION OF LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM

Built in 1905, the Craftsman-style J. Gilbert Smith History House is a piece of Los Altos history, purchased by the city in 1954.

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— and the apricot orchard continues to bear fruit.

To step into the History House is to step back in time. A candlestick telephone from the 1930s sits atop a desk in the entryway, confounding visiting youngsters raised on cell phones.

Docent Mardell Blaufarb said visiting the house “is especially good for young people, because they don’t have a memory of any of this stuff.”

The original owner of the home, J. Gilbert Smith, came to the area from Oregon to attend Stanford University, according to a historical timeline compiled by Don McDonald, historian for the Los Altos History Museum. Smith planted the orchard after he left school in 1899 for unknown reasons. He began building the home in 1901 and finished in 1905. The buildings at that time included a tank tower he built, which still stands on the property.

In 1974, the Los Altos City Council voted to convert the house to a historical museum. The building was upgraded to meet public safety and Adults with Disabilities Act standards by 1977. In 1990, the 85-year-old building was



COURTESY OF LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM

Margaret Smith, J. Gilbert Smith’s wife, plays piano in the living room of the Smith House Christmas of 1946.

refurbished again, transforming it into the living-history museum it is today.

While the structure of the two-story home is original, community members donated furniture and decorative art to re-create a typical upper-level home of the 1930s, according to Blaufarb, who vouches for its authenticity.

“I was a little girl during the Great Depression, so I just

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HISTORY HOUSE

remember a lot about (that era)," she said.

Smith incorporated built-ins such as storage for fireplace accessories and wooden sliding doors that divide different areas of the house. For more than 100 years, the doors have slid smoothly between the walls, according to Blaufarb.

The master bedroom on the second floor has a window that overlooks the orchard and offers indirect light, a design that didn't come into wide use until the 1930s.

The light sources are concealed in coves and decorative glass, producing light reflected off the ceiling.

A white, monitor-style refrigerator that looks more like an icebox, able to keep food frozen for only a few hours, dominates the kitchen. A scale sits on the countertop. An integral part of early kitchens, a scale was needed to weigh



LISA ROBINSON/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

The history house livingroom boasts antique furnishings and is where people used to gather to listen to the radio, primary source of entertainment in before the days of television.

ingredients, which cookbooks of the time measured by weight, not cups. The toaster required full attention – there is no audible warning to signal the toast is ready.

The dining room boasts a small table with seating for four and glass cabinets filled with Depression-era glassware.

An antique radio in the living room provided the primary source of entertainment before the days of television. Blaufarb, who spent her childhood

on a farm in Minnesota, recalled listening to such a radio with her family. A one-seat sofa next to a basket of needles, thread and torn clothes waiting to be mended allowed comfortable seating.

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HISTORY HOUSE

Continued from Page 17

“No one threw things away,” Blaufarb said. “During the Depression, you learned the value of money.”

An upstairs apartment built several years after the original home remains closed to the public. Blaufarb said the unit is inconsistent with the integrity of the rest of the house.

Smith and his wife, Margaret, sold 8.84 acres of the property to the city (price tag: \$115,000), but retained the house and 1.36 acres as a life tenancy that would be gift-deeded to the city upon their deaths, according to McDonald. After the 89-year-old Smith died in 1966, Margaret added the apartment, including a small kitchen and bathroom, next to the master bedroom because she could no longer climb stairs.

After Margaret's death in 1973 at 96, the city rented the apartment to Los Altos firefighter Bob Mordecai and his wife, Pam, in 1977. Their son, the first baby to live in the house, was born in 1981, according to McDonald. The



COURTESY OF LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM

This photograph of the rear of the Smith house circa 1910 is a rare find. In the foreground is J. Gilbert Smith's newly planted orchard.

Mordecais moved out soon after, making them the last residents. Blaufarb said museum staff plan to restore the unit.

The J. Gilbert Smith History House is open noon to 4 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays. For more information, visit www.losaltoshistory.org/house.htm or call 948-9472, ext. 89, to schedule a docent-led tour. 🗑️



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Sage – the fragrance of California

By Tanya Kucak

If California had a state fragrance, my vote would go to Cleveland sage leaves. My second choice would be hummingbird sage leaves and my next choice would be white sage leaves. Each one of these is distinctive and evokes a different mood, color and sense of place. But all of them are salvias.

Betsy Clebsch, author of two books (“A Book of Salvias” and “The New Book of Salvias: Sages for Every Garden,” Timber Press, 1997 and 2003) on salvias from around the world, discussed the plants and led a tour of her garden last spring. All of the following evergreen shrubby sages grow best in full sun with good drainage, no fertilizer and no summer water once established.

You can’t go wrong with any of the numerous Cleveland



ARVIND KUMAR/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

Cleveland sage adds a wonderful fragrance, like rose potpourri, to gardens on warm days.

sage cultivars, Clebsch said. She likened their leaf fragrance to rose potpourri. The secrets to growing them include withholding extra water after the plant is established, perfect drainage and cutting back a little each January. She singled out the cultivar Winnifred Gilman for its prolific flowers.

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It forms a 3-foot airy shrub with ashy-green leaves. In early summer, its 1-foot ruby-red flowering stems are covered with whorls of violet-blue flowers.

Cleveland sages grow fast and are often planted as fillers to be removed after slower-growing plants fill in. But the scent is so beguiling that gardeners find a way to keep them or a different spot to plant a new one.

If you enjoy spending time in your garden at night, a dramatic plant in moonlight is white sage, with its gray-white leaves and pink-stemmed inflorescences. The shrub is 4 feet tall and wide, with flowering stems in the spring that can tower up to 9 feet high. Prune the stems after flowering. The pungently scented leaves were used in Native-American ceremonies. White sage prefers dry, rocky slopes. Because it can get dense, it benefits from good air circulation. Its leaves are larger than many other sages, lending a coarser texture.

Black sage, despite its name, has small, shiny mid-green leaves. It forms mounds 3-5 feet high and almost as wide.



COURTESY OF WIKICOMMONS

In the spring, purple sage features pinkish-purple flowers with light-green leaves that turn gray-white in warmth.

Several lower-growing cultivars are more commonly used in landscapes, particularly the 2-foot-high Terra Seca, which can spread 6 feet wide. Clebsch called it a substantial, tough and easy-to-grow and contain plant. Its spring flowers are tiny and white. Keep it low by pruning any upright growth as it appears.

Purple sage is named for its pinkish-purple flowers. In the spring, new leaves emerge light green, turning gray-white as the days

warm up. It forms a soft mound 3-5 feet tall and wide, with flowering stalks adding another 6 inches or so in spring. Like Cleveland sage, it appreciates a light trim in January. Clebsch has found the purple sages to live long in her garden.

All of these sages can hybridize freely with each other and, in some cases, with some of the annual sages. If you have more than one type of salvia in your garden, keep an eye out for any hybrids that may appear – and new fragrances.

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Almost like planting a money tree

By Tanya Kucak

Imagine a perennial plant that produces nutrient-dense food year-round, likes regular water but can also survive on occasional water if well-mulched, is attractive and sculptural, grows in sun or part shade, is easy to propagate and requires little care.

In the right light, it looks like something out of Dr. Seuss.

I've been growing this plant for four or five years, and I've never seen it sold in nurseries.

Variously known as perennial kale, walking kale and tree collards, it's "an heirloom variety or cluster of varieties" of *Brassica oleracea acephala*, according to Eric Toensmeier in his book "Perennial Vegetables" (Chelsea Green, 2007).

Compared to annual collards, perennial kale is sweeter and less cabbagey, but with a less silky, cooked texture. Compared to annual flat Russian kales and dinosaur kales, perennial kale has a less delicate texture but a milder taste. In cooler weather it develops an even sweeter taste, and its substantial texture makes perennial kale perfect for stir-frying or mixing with other cooked vegetables.

I started with two plants, one from an 18-inch cutting I got on an organic garden tour, and the other from a 3-inch

Continued on Page 22



TANYA KUCAK/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

Perennial kale develops a sweeter taste and more purple in the leaves with cooler weather.



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KALE

Continued from Page 21

seedling I got at the Los Altos Plant Exchange. Within a couple of years, each plant was more than 6 feet tall and 3-5 feet wide. To keep the plant within bounds, I give away cuttings to everyone who admires my kale trees, bring cuttings to plant exchanges and harvest a grocery bagful of leaves every couple of weeks. If you have enough space you can let them flop over and sprawl or keep them trained on a trellis.

Last fall, I planted six cuttings along another fence. Already the new plants are more than 4 feet high and producing leaves up to a foot long and 6 inches wide.

The wavy-edged, purple-tinged green leaves are best eaten cooked. I wash them, remove the midrib by running my fingers from the stem end toward the tip, then slice thinly to create “kale spaghetti,” which takes only a minute to cook.

If I’m going to make soup, I add the kale to a pot of boiling water and wait until it’s limp, about 30 seconds, then remove it. The water makes a great soup base, and the thinly sliced kale holds its shape so well that it can be used with sliced or diced red peppers to make a colorful salad, mixed with potatoes to make colcannon or added to pasta and sauce.

Another way to cook kale is by stir-frying with your choice of a fat, a sweetener, an acid and an optional salt. I like to use peanut butter, agave syrup, balsamic vinegar and a little water. With constant stirring, it takes less than



TANYA KUCAK/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

Perennial kale can grow 4 to 6 feet tall in a year.

a minute for a potful of thinly sliced kale to go limp. Then it’s ready to eat alone or add to other dishes.

For more information on the spring and fall plant exchanges, usually held the Saturday mornings following the Tuesday afternoon plant sale in late April/early May and late September/early October, watch the Web site of the Garden Club of Los Altos, www.gardencluboflosaltos.org.

Tanya Kucak gardens organically. Contact her at tanya.garden@gmail.com. 🌱

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Make 'em laugh

Decorate your home with a sense of humor

By Gina Viscusi Elson

According to Tinker Bell, thinking happy thoughts can help your spirit soar and, in Peter Pan and Wendy's case, even fly. Decorating with a sense of humor can lighten your mood and make your home a happy place. But how do you draw the line between whimsical and stylish and just plain tacky and weird? Anchor classic elements with a bit of the unexpected and you'll have a home that is interesting and soulful.

Bring on a smile

Splashes of vibrant color enliven a space and awaken your inner grin. You can't help but feel happy surrounded by hues of Tiffany blue, tangerine or limoncello, for example. If you aren't ready to commit to the walls,

Continued on Page 26



DEAN BIRINYI/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

Vintage English pub signs and chairs upholstered in bright blue and red give this traditional dining room a lighthearted look. The bold zebra rug is refreshing and unexpected.



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INTERIOR HUMOR

Continued from Page 25

try adding a few fun pillows or upholstering a chair in a vivid palette and you have the perfect formula for lifting your melancholy. The key to selecting a whimsical fabric is to stick with a bold pattern in just one or two colors. Great choices from Calico Corners are Parasols, a cheery print in turquoise; Stockholm, a bold floral in Sungold; and Silhouette, a modern damask pattern in amethyst. Remember, a little goes a long way, so use these fabrics only as accents.

Induce a chuckle

Gazing at whimsical artwork is always pure enjoyment. I adore animal art created by fine artists – I have a piece by Linda Begg, a New Orleans portrait artist who painted a blue cat sitting in front of the oldest church in the U.S. The cat has a playfully angelic look but a cat is mischievous by nature and each time I walk past it, I laugh. Of course, I am an animal lover so it speaks to me.

Artwork is very subjective. When you choose an investment art piece – an original – it doesn't have to be serious. Art with a sense of humor is priceless. More traditional but still lighthearted choices are vintage English pub signs and French advertising posters. The joyful color combinations and use of animals and people in whimsical clothing captured the hearts of the Europeans



DEAN BIRINYI/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

A fireplace mantel can be fun to decorate. The stylish llamas from a gallery in Taos, New Mexico, are cheeky and cheerful. The fox sconces are from a Los Angeles antique store.

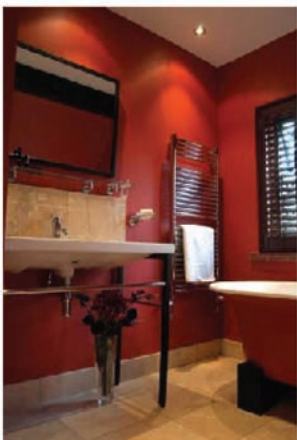
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INTERIOR HUMOR

and are now highly sought after. You can find copies at great price points to add instant pizzazz to a room.

Accessories are chuckles just waiting to happen. Go for oversized pieces to adorn a mantel or tabletop. Grab objects in all shapes and sizes and style them in a bookcase. Mix complementary colors such as orange and teal, or try the monochromatic look of white on white. Either formula will be quite witty and impactful. An easy and inexpensive way to achieve this look is to search out items you already have (make sure they aren't heirlooms) or pick up bric-a-brac at thrift stores or garage sales. Look for things that have a sculptural appeal and don't worry about the fact that they are different colors. Once you have an eclectic and interesting collection, you can spray paint everything glossy white or in your two complementary colors. You'll be pleased with the results.



DEAN BIRINYI/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

Walls and accessories in vibrant colors, oversized whimsical accents and unexpected oars as artwork make this classic home a happy place to dwell.

Aim for the belly laugh

The best way to decorate for an all-out belly laugh is to choose pieces that have a story to tell – perhaps it's the

tale of your journey to track down that treasure or how you discovered a great find or the item itself has a humorous

Continued on Page 28

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DEAN BIRINYI/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

Original art doesn't have to be serious. This whimsical blue cat juxtaposed against the oldest church in the United States is a lighthearted, smile-inducing treat.

Continued from Page 27

history.

If only the fox sconces above my fireplace mantel could talk. I discovered them in an antique store in Los Angeles. They were originally in Hugh Hefner's Playboy mansion. Oh the things they must have seen and heard! My friends and family all have a great laugh just imagining the scenarios.

Go on the hunt to find something – that one thing that will speak to your funny bone. Barry Johnson, a friend and fellow interior designer, just opened Brick Monkey on Broadway in Redwood City. He and his two partners are passionate foragers, so you'll always find something curious and distinctive. It's worth a visit.

Another great adventure is spending a Saturday morning at a flea market. It definitely offers the thrill of unknown experiences, whether you find something irresistible or leave empty-handed. I like the De Anza College Flea Market held the first Saturday of each month.

You probably already have something stored away that can be pulled out and displayed as whimsical and meaningful art. A friend of mine just uncovered a story her husband wrote for her when they were dating and she framed and hung the typewritten prose as a reminder of their incredible journey together. It fills her soul and makes her smile. And that's the point.

Gina Viscusi Elson's design studio is located at 382 First St., Los Altos. For more information, call 941-7800 or visit www.VEinteriordesign.com.



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Creating unique but useful spaces

By Laxmi Natarajan

A great way to approach designing a garden or updating existing yard space is to create spaces that are special and serve specific functions in your lifestyle.

Carving out spaces that suit your current circumstances and requirements makes your yard more usable and enables you to spend more time in the garden. The notion of forming various spaces in the garden can be equated to building garden rooms, but I find that idea a little more constraining. With the concept of configuring spaces, there is an implied sense of transition and flow among the different areas of the garden.

Entryways generate the first impression of our homes and gardens. A welcoming entryway makes a positive impression on visitors. Regardless of the style of the house and garden, clear and easy access to the front door is a good design feature.

A well-groomed front yard also improves curb appeal. The perennial garden showcases its color and bids a cheer-



COURTESY OF LAXMI NATARAJAN

This casual stepdown entryway creates an inviting first impression for visitors.

ful welcome. An elegant and casual pathway beckons visitors to spend a little time viewing the beautiful plantings.

If the designated space is intended as a play area, then



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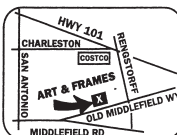
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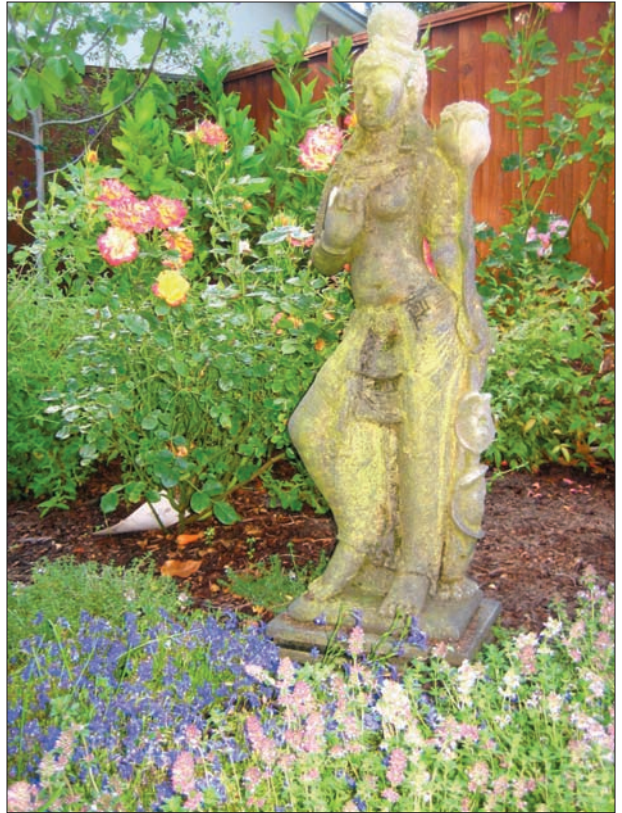
CREATIVE SPACES

different criteria are important. The area must be easily viewed and accessed from the house to observe and protect the children. Structures should be tailored to the ages: a simple swing set or playhouse for toddlers or a custom tree house for older children. Use ground material that's safe for children, such as grass or playground bark. Establish hardy and child-friendly plantings that can take the foot traffic and abuse around the play area and still provide shade when it gets too hot. The safety of the children may require that functionality becomes more important than a nice and pretty appearance in that space.

The location of the space related to function is very important. If the children's play area is way out in the back where you cannot keep an eye on them easily, the time spent in the play area becomes restricted. If the kitchen garden is far from the kitchen area, then chances are you might not be motivated to harvest the fresh herbs into sizzling pots at the last minute. If your kitchen garden is located far from the kitchen due to various reasons like space constraints or the light conditions, plant some container gardens with herbs near the kitchen that can accommodate the need for the fresh herbs.

Spaces can have multiple functions and purposes as well. Quiet corners for reading, lounging, having tea and garden viewing can form a personal and inviting garden. Raised vegetable beds make it easier to maintain a vegetable patch. Container gardens provide a way to add spaces

Continued on Page 32



COURTESY OF LAXMI NATARAJAN

Different layers of materials make this meditative space functional and visually arresting.

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A black and white photograph of a sunroom with large windows and a wooden ceiling. The room is furnished with a sofa, a chair, and a coffee table. The text "Saving Energy is Beautiful!" is overlaid on the image.

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Continued from Page 31

around the yard. Grow herbs and vegetables in containers near a barbecue grill area, for instance.

Harmonize the different garden spaces and create continuity in the garden by repeating the colors, ideas, materials and plants. Focal points define spaces and provide eye-candy to the viewer that lures them into different sections.

A client once displayed her Mexican pottery collection in different spaces in the garden. She connected the function and mood of the each area to the color and feel of her pots, but the unified theme of the pottery tied the different garden spaces together.

There are many ways to create our own personal spaces, whether a place to relax, a garden studio to paint in or a writer's cabin, but as we study and learn the individual tasks and lessons of designing and gardening, the garden remains a place that is greater than the sum of its parts. The garden grows and is in constant transition. The only way we can make nature work for us is by obeying its rules, by planting native and drought-re-



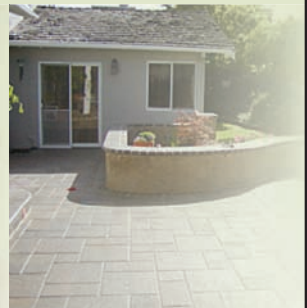
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Play structures should be tailored to the ages, a simple swing set or playhouse for toddlers or a custom tree house for older children.

sistant plants and making sustainable and earth-friendly choices in our materials.

Laxmi Natarajan is a landscape/garden designer in the Bay Area. For more information, call 703-9756 or visit www.bagicha.com. 🗑️

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Another cheap thrill in the garden

By Tanya Kucak

Tomato aficionados are such thrill seekers.

With hundreds of different varieties available in the Bay Area as seedlings, why would anyone want to spend an extra couple of months to grow tomatoes from seed?

Because you can. Because thousands of varieties of tomatoes are available from seed, because you need purchase seed only once and because, if you know the right people, you can obtain varieties that aren't yet available commercially and keep growing them yourself.

I've been growing heirloom tomatoes for years, but last year was the first time I saved seeds.

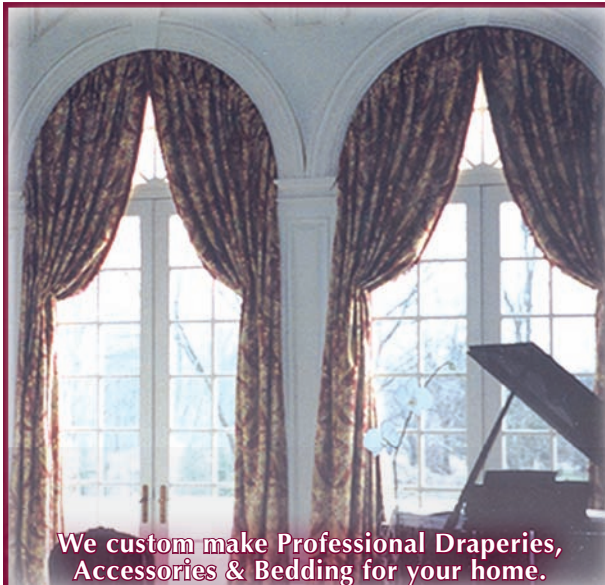
The basics are easy. Choose an open-pollinated (OP) variety that you like. Some common OP varieties are Cherokee Purple, Brandywine, Black Cherry, Pineapple and Caspian Pink. These are varieties that, collected properly, will breed true.

Continued on Page 34



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OPEN POLLINATION

Continued from Page 33

You can, of course, save the seeds of hybrid tomatoes, but you can't count on getting anything resembling the parent tomato if you plant them. Hybrids include SunGold, Momotaro and Russo Bruno.

Collect them properly. Tomatoes are self-pollinating, but you can facilitate pollination by shaking the tomato cages whenever you pass by. Bees in your garden will collect pollen from your tomatoes and, in the process, sometimes cross-pollinate them. Bee activity won't affect this year's crop, but if you want to be absolutely sure your seeds breed true, you need to bag your blossoms.

The bags can be made of any material that allows light and air through but keeps tiny pollinators out. You can buy organza bags, or make bags from nylon stockings or other similar fabrics. Each bag should be big enough to enclose a blossom truss, with a way to tie the end that holds it to the stem. As soon as you see a bunch of tomato blooms



TANYA KUCAK/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

Open pollination creates Caspian Pink tomatoes, above, ready for seed saving or eating.

forming, but before they open, place a bag over the blossoms. Keep it in place until the green fruits start forming, then tie a ribbon to that stem so you'll remember which tomatoes were bagged.

Cross-fertilization is rare unless you're growing one of the currant tomatoes, however. You can generally skip the bagging step if you collect seeds from your earliest tomatoes, which may have developed before the bees were out in numbers or if you're willing to take

a chance. I've also collected seeds from identified farmers' market tomatoes.

When your chosen tomato is ripe, squeeze the seeds and juice into a labeled pint or quart container and add another inch or so of water. (You can eat the rest of the tomato.) Use a different container for each tomato variety. Let it sit outdoors for at least five days to ferment. It will get moldy and stinky, which is good. The fermentation helps break down the gelatinous coat around each seed and reduces

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OPEN POLLINATION

the chance of passing on any diseases from this year's garden.

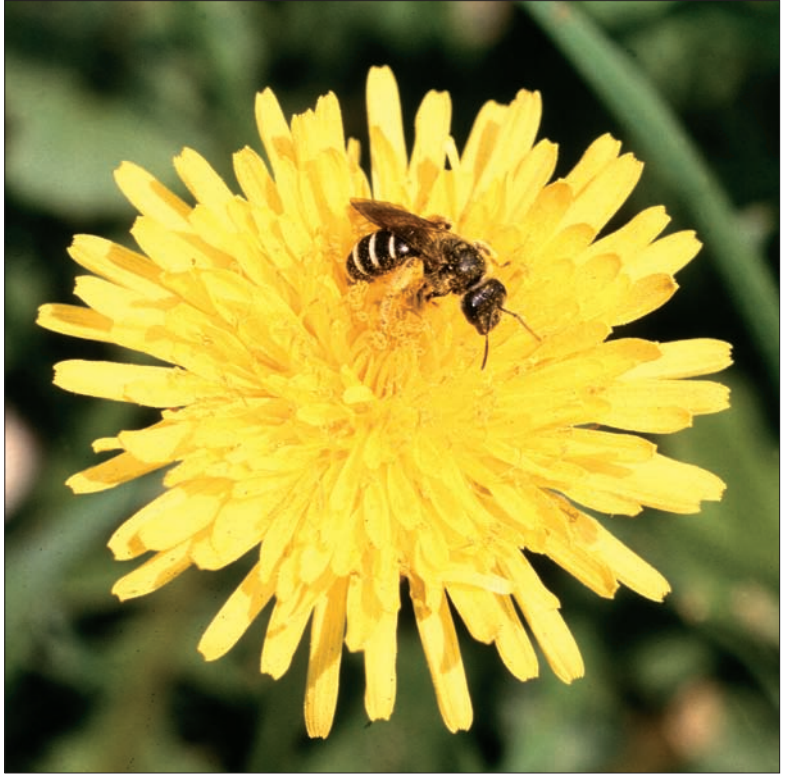
When a layer of mold has formed, take your hose-end sprayer and gently fill the container. Pour off the mold, taking care not to pour out the seeds at the bottom. Any seeds that float can be discarded. Continue to rinse.

When the water runs clear, put the seeds on a clean piece of paper to dry, marked with the tomato's name. Separate the seeds so they don't clump and sprout prematurely.

After the seeds have dried – at least a week – store them in labeled envelopes in a cool, dry place. Well-stored seeds will be viable for at least five years.

Some great sources of OP tomato seeds are Sandhill Preservation, Tomato Growers Supply and Victory Seeds. A wonderful book to aid selection is "Smith & Hawken: 100 Heirloom Tomatoes for the American Garden" (Workman Publishing, 1999) by Carolyn Male.

Tanya Kucak gardens organically and is growing more than 40 OP tomatoes this year. Contact her at tanya.garden@gmail.com. 🌱



SCOTT BAUER/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

For the approximately 5 percent of tomato flowers that get cross-pollinated, small wild sweat bees, like this one visiting a dandelion, are the most likely culprits.

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Secrets of flowering hydrangeas revealed

By Tanya Kucak

For several years I walked by some blue mophead hydrangeas in my neighborhood that bloomed only sporadically. Every fall, the mow-and-blow gardeners would prune them down to 3 feet high. Ironically, they would've blossomed more if they'd been left unpruned. Finally, three years ago, I told the owner I could make them flourish if I pruned them.

The first spring after an hour or two pruning a whole row of mophead and lacecap hydrangeas, the shrubs were covered with huge, vivid flowers. Garden-party visitors struggling with their own recalcitrant hydrangeas asked about the secret to making them thrive.

It's no secret.

Any book on pruning will tell you that mophead and lacecap hydrangeas, cultivars of *Hydrangea macrophylla*, bloom on second-year wood. For a plant that's flowering in 2009, "second-year wood" is



TANYA KUCAK/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

Mophead hydrangeas will bloom profusely if pruned correctly in the fall.

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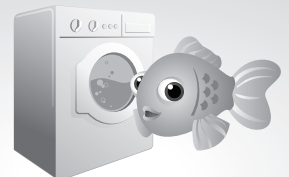
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- Wash only full loads of laundry in your clothes washer. That goes for your dishwasher, too.
- In cooler weather, your lawn and garden need less water than they do during the summer. Remember to adjust your sprinkler timers accordingly.
- Use a broom instead of a hose to clean patios, walkways, and driveways.

For details on water-efficient appliance rebates and programs available to Cal Water's Los Altos customers, visit www.calwater.com/conservation, e-mail conservation@calwater.com, or contact your Cal Water Customer Center.



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HYDRANGEA SECRETS

wood that was produced in 2008. (Newer cultivars such as All Summer Beauty bloom on the current season's growth.) It's a shame to keep watering these lush shrubs all summer, only to have them pruned into green boxes. And it's so simple to make them blossom prolifically, year after year.

I've been pruning these hydrangeas for three years, and each summer they're loaded with flowers.

Here's what to do: in the fall, look at the stems that have flowered. You can cut each of these back. Leave every other branch alone. That's it.

When I cut back the stems that have flowered, I do two things.

First, if the flower head is still in good condition, I save it as a dried, cut flower and determine how long to make the stem. Hydrangea flowers will dry on their own and stay attractive for a year or more. All you need to do is remove all the leaves, including the tiny ones closest to the flower head, and place them in a vase without water. I usually cut more than needed, to ensure that a full bouquet is preserved.

Using hydrangeas as fresh-cut flowers is more complicated. If you simply cut the stems and put them in water, the flowers will dry out and not last very long. You need to follow a series of treatments to keep the flowers fresh.

Second, if the branch is encroaching on a path or another shrub, I cut it back hard. Depending on how old the shrub and how many stems it has, I may cut other branches hard to shape the shrub. Each cut should be just above a set of buds, above a set of leaf scars or at a branch junction. Be careful not to nick any new buds!

As with roses, pruning lower on the plant will produce larger and fewer flowers, while pruning higher on the plant will produce smaller and more numerous flowers. Cut-

ting into woodier stems is a gamble, however: You can either awaken dormant buds or cut down so far that no viable buds have survived.

The hallmark of poor pruning, which is rampant, is a plethora of stubs. If you think of a plant's stems as a circuit, running from roots

to leaves, it's obvious that any path not leading from root to leaf (or bud) is "dead." The leaves act as engines producing food from sunlight and sending it to the roots. In turn, the roots suck up water from the soil and send it to the leaves. The stubs, outside the circuit, are open wounds that the plant cannot close, so they become susceptible to insects and diseases.

Tanya Kucak gardens organically. Contact her at tanya.garden@gmail.com. 

Here's what to do: In the fall, look at the stems that have flowered. You can cut each of these back. Leave every other branch alone.

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FILOLI

Filoli hosts
orchard tours
and nature hikes

Town Crier Report

Filoli, an historical site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is one of the finest remaining country estates of the early 20th century. The 654-acre property includes a 36,000-square-foot mansion furnished with antiques and decorative art, as well as 16 acres of European-inspired gardens that showcase an inspired horticultural collection. Established as a private residence in 1917 and opened to the public in 1976 to promote cultural and horticultural endeavors, Filoli has scheduled a number of summer and fall activities.

Nature hikes

- 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Saturdays, through Oct. 24.

Filoli's Nature Preserve boasts more than 7 miles of trails traversing six different types of native California habitat. The docent-led hikes cover approximately 3 miles of well-maintained trails and last approximately 2.5 hours.

Experienced nature education docents will describe wildlife, plants, endangered species and the historical background of the area. Visitors may not hike without a docent.

Docent-led hikes are included in the general admission fee for Filoli, which also includes entrance to the house and garden.

Advance registration is required. Admission is \$12 adults, \$5 children and students with ID. Free for Filoli members. Exception is Oct. 3, the Autumn Festival.

For reservations and more information, call 364-8300, ext. 509.

Orchard tours

- 10:30 a.m. to noon Thursdays and Saturdays through Oct. 24.

Tour Filoli's heirloom orchard and learn how the preserve conserves the rare fruits and trees and the landscape of the country estate. Visitors may not tour the orchard without a docent.

Visitors taking a docent-led orchard tour pay general admission to Filoli (\$12 adults, \$5 children and students with ID), which includes access to the house and garden. There is no extra charge for the orchard tour. Free for Filoli members. Exception is Oct. 3, the Autumn Festival.

Advance registration is required.

For reservations and more information, call 364-8300, ext. 509.

Filoli is located at 86 Cañada Road, Woodside.

For more information, visit www.filoli.org.



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