

AUG 2012 / VOL 102 NO 8  
US \$7 CAN \$9

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE**

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN  
SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS



**REED  
HILDER-  
BRAND**

Their modernist instincts, in three acts

**SUSAN VAN ATTA**

Planting designs in a native tongue

**AGENDA 21**

The greatest UN plot never hatched

**THE TROUBLE IN CALI**

Community redevelopment has cratered

## AS IN NATURE

### SUSAN VAN ATTA'S PICKS FOR PLANTING DESIGNS USUALLY STICK CLOSE TO HOME.

BY BILL MARKEN, HONORARY ASLA

Susan Van Atta, FASLA, grew up in Orange County, California, where she witnessed up close how quickly a thriving agrarian landscape of citrus groves, smallish cities and towns, and grassy open spaces could be transformed by rampant growth and lack of planning. At the University of California, Santa Barbara, in the 1970s, she became an environmental science major, but the renowned biology professor Robert J. Haller let her and a few other academic outliers (including the occasional art major) into his plant communities classes, which were generally restricted to budding biologists. Haller took the class on camping trips throughout California to study plants, from the coastal sage scrub near campus to the desert for “Joshua trees by flashlight” to the alpine plant community of the Trinity Mountains in the state’s far north. On these field trips Van Atta built a scientific foundation for understanding habitats and how spe-

cies live together—all of which play a big part in what she does today with her firm, Van Atta Associates Landscape Architecture and Planning, based in Santa Barbara. “Plants got me into this profession,” Van Atta says, “along with my concerns about land use.”

The firm works mainly in the immediate area on high-end residential design for beachfront houses and Montecito estates, as well as habitat restoration and corporate and public spaces. Van Atta doesn’t have to go far for design and horticultural inspiration. The area, given its blissful Mediterranean/subtropical climate, has a rich history of landscape design and horticulture—nearly century-old estates that are now parks come to mind, such as Val Verde and Casa del Herrero designed by the pioneering landscape architect Lockwood de Forest III. She has been working lately with the Cultural Landscape



Foundation to develop a plan for preserving and restoring the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, where de Forest emphasized a flowing naturalism and Beatrix Farrand brought her neoclassicism from the East Coast. But its main mission has been, as its founders in 1926 intended, experimentation with California species for home gardens by grouping plants in ecological communities such as meadows, deserts, and chaparral.

In her own designs, Van Atta relies heavily on many of the same native plants road-tested in the botanic garden. “Use plants as in nature,” she advises. “Don’t think of them individually and in isolation but in communities.” Natives are not always easy to grow, and their use “must be very informed—particularly in California.” The state has nearly 6,000 native species, and most of them need fairly specific conditions of soil, water, and exposure.

A book by Van Atta, *The Southern California Native Flower Garden* (Gibbs Smith, 2009), describes her love of native plants and the ways she uses them. She recommends 164 California native plants for their flowers or other attributes as well as their landscape use. She insists on choosing the right spots for plants and creating compatible communities: For example, redblower buckwheat (*Eriogonum grande* var. *rubescens*) should be planted on a slope or in a rock garden, as an understory plant to fill in around larger perennials or shrubs such as island snowflake (*Eriophyllum nevinii* ‘Canyon Silver’) and island bush poppy (*Dendromecon harfordii*). “These are all native plants you actually can buy,” she says—and she knows, because she scoured nursery catalogs and native plant growers to make sure. Natives have always been scarce in California nurseries, because they often look piny in small containers.

## THE VAN ATTA SAMPLER

Van Atta uses California natives confidently but not exclusively. For estate gardens, she will often place nonnative ornamental plants near the house for formal effects and use natives farther out on the property, where they merge with nature. These plants are among her favorite California natives.

### **ARCTOSTAPHYLOS DENSIFLORA** **'HOWARD MCMINN':**

Twisty and bronze barked, this evergreen manzanita brings dependability along with its wild heritage into a civilized garden. Mounding, from 5 to 6 feet tall and wide, with small pink flowers in winter.

**Landscape uses:** informal masses or soft foundation planting. Or create a flowering woodland garden by combining with *Ceanothus* 'Ray Hartman,' 'Canyon Snow' iris, or wild ginger (*Asarum caudatum*).



### **DUDLEYA PULVERULENTA** **(CHALK DUDLEYA):**

A coastal succulent native to precarious places where no plant should grow.

Less than a foot tall, with striking chalky rosettes.

**Landscape uses:** singly in containers, in crevices between rocks, or as an edging to a border.



### **FRAGARIA SPP. (STRAWBERRIES):**

Van Atta likes *Fragaria vesca* (shown) for its abundance of tiny flowers and miniature berries. She also uses the native beach strawberry (*Fragaria chiloensis*).

**Landscape uses:** fast-spreading ground cover in dry shade under oaks or in full sun near the coast.



**HEUCHERA 'SANTA ANA CARDINAL':** "This week's favorite plant" is what Van Atta calls this native hybrid introduced by Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden and now widely available (sold by Monrovia nursery, among others). She recently planted 60 at her own home. It's an evergreen perennial, 2 to 4 feet tall, with "clouds of brilliant red flowers." **Landscape uses:** in drifts for waves of color or mixed into shady borders.



**IRIS DOUGLASIANA 'CANYON SNOW':** One of the winners developed at Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. Easy to grow, evergreen, up to 3 feet tall, with sturdy bright green foliage and pure white flowers in early spring. **Landscape uses:** brightening a shady woodland garden or edging a pond or path.

## OF 6,000 CALIFORNIA NATIVES, VAN ATTA HAS ABOUT 12 DOZEN FAVORITES.



### **RIBES AUREUM VAR. GRACILLIMUM** **(GOLDEN CURRANT):**

Tasty yellow-to-black currants follow bright yellow flowers in spring. Native from sea level to nearly 10,000 feet.

Deciduous, thicket-forming shrub, 5 to 10 feet tall.

**Landscape uses:** background shrub or in the shade of oaks.



### **VERBENA LILACINA 'DE LA MINA':**

One of Van Atta's new favorites—"It blooms all the time but doesn't look like the drought-resistant plant that it is." From Baja, California; mounding, spreading evergreen, up to 2 feet high, 2 to 3 feet wide with small, fragrant purple flowers.

**Landscape uses:** in masses or containers or in a mixed flower border.

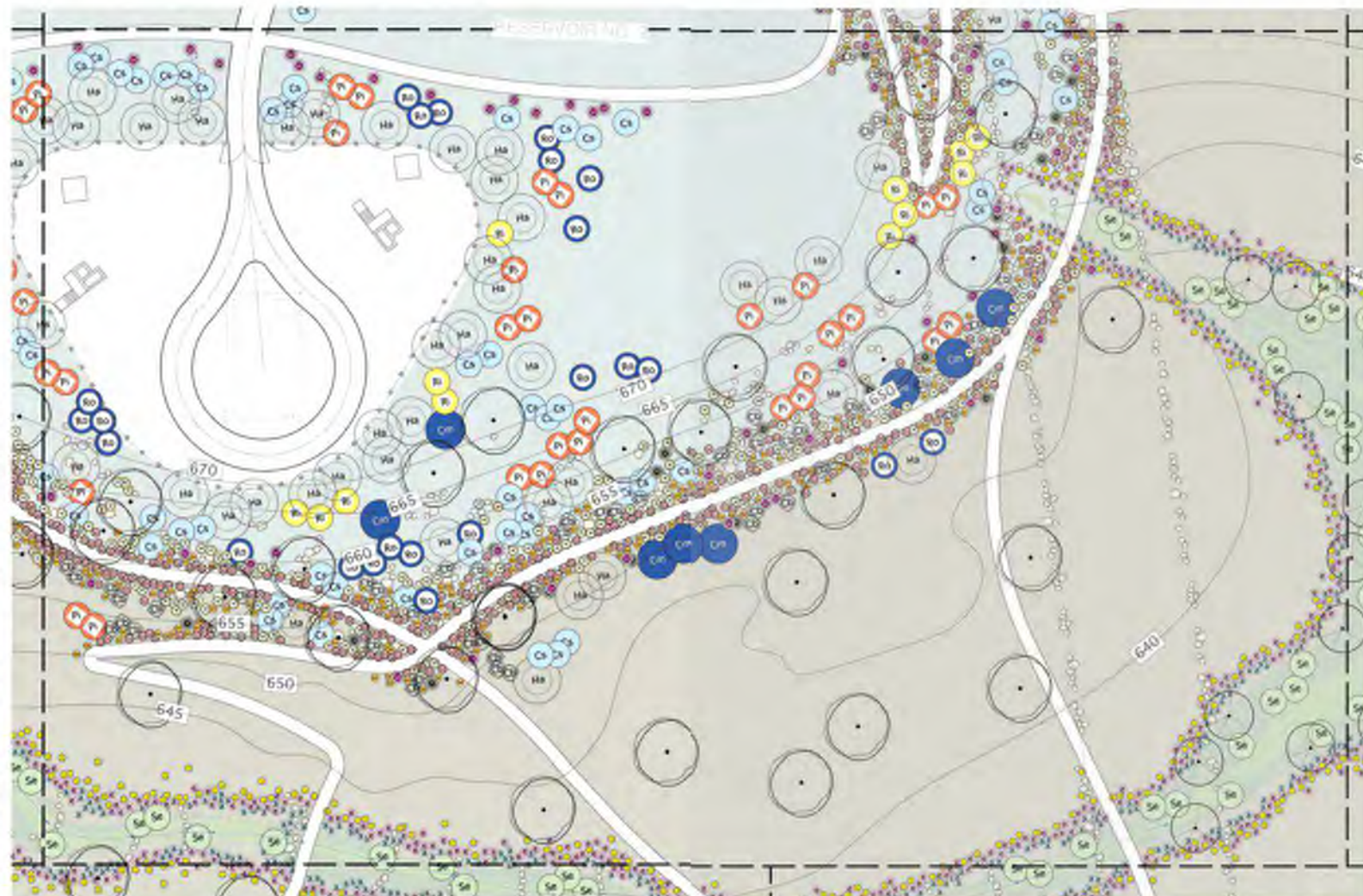
THE PROJECTS:  
NO SACRIFICE

In her designs, Van Atta goes heavy on the plants. In choosing them, she thinks first of sustainability, which, she says, "does not require sacrifice." She likes certain plants for their ability to create a particular mood or experience—say, an escape into California's wild natural world or even the tropics. Here are four examples.



**ABOVE**  
A naturalized slope covers a former concrete reservoir that has been converted to underground tanks. Native grasses and spring wildflowers re-create local habitat.

**TOP**  
In the rolling hills of Santa Barbara, the plan for this 25-acre park calls for six native tree species and two dozen shrubs and perennials.



Symbol	Scientific Name	Common Name
Se	<i>Acer negundo</i> var. <i>californicum</i>	Box Elder
	<i>Platanus racemosa</i>	California Sycamore
	<i>Quercus agrifolia</i>	Coast Live Oak
	<i>Salix exigua</i>	Sandbar Willow
	<i>Salix lasiolepis</i>	Arroyo Willow
Sm	<i>Sambucus mexicana</i>	Mexican Elderberry
<b>Shrubs</b>		
Cm	<i>Ceanothus megacephalus</i>	Big Pod Ceanothus
	<i>Ceanothus spinosus</i>	Greenbark Ceanothus
Cs	<i>Cercocarpus betuloides</i>	Western Mountain Mahogany
Cb	<i>Nerada spumosa</i> var. <i>spumosa</i>	Saw-toothed Goldenbush
	<i>Heteromeles arbutifolia</i>	Toyon
Ha	<i>Melissa leucina</i>	Laurel Summac
Mi	<i>Mimulus lewisii</i> var. <i>lewisii</i>	Monkey Flower
	<i>Prunus ilicifolia</i> ssp. <i>ilicifolia</i>	Hollyleaf Cherry
Pi	<i>Rhamnus crocea</i>	Redberry
	<i>Rhus integrifolia</i>	Lemonade Berry
Ri	<i>Rhus ovata</i>	Sugarbush
Ro	<i>Ribes speciosum</i>	Fuchsia Flowering Currant
<b>Herbaceous/Perennial</b>		
	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Yarrow
	<i>Artemisia douglasiana</i>	Douglas Mugwort
	<i>Chrysogalum pumilum</i>	Soap Plant
	<i>Datura wrightii</i>	Sacred Thornapple
	<i>Epilobium canum</i> var. <i>canum</i>	Hoary California Fuchsia
	<i>Eriogonum filiforme</i> var. <i>filiforme</i>	Leafy Daisy
	<i>Galium nuttallii</i> ssp. <i>nuttallii</i>	San Diego Bedstraw
	<i>Gnaphalium californicum</i>	California Cutweed
	<i>Gnaphalium canescens</i> ssp. <i>microcephalum</i>	Smallhead Cutweed
	<i>Isocoma menziesii</i> var. <i>veronicoides</i>	Green-leaved Dune Goldenbush
	<i>Lesqueria flagellifolia</i> var. <i>flagellifolia</i>	Common California Aster
	<i>Leymus condensatus</i>	Giant Wild Rye
	<i>Lolium scoparium</i>	Deer Weed
	<i>Malacothrix saxatilis</i> var. <i>tenella</i>	Cliff Desert Dandelion
	<i>Salvia spathacea</i>	Hummingbird Sage
	<i>Sidalcea malviflora</i> ssp. <i>malviflora</i>	Checkerbloom
	<i>Stachys bullata</i>	Hedge Nettle

Sheffield Reservoir, one of Van Atta's wildest landscapes, restored a degraded landscape in the Santa Barbara foothills. The park relies totally on native plants—locals, actually—propagated mostly by cuttings from a nearby nature park, as a way to preserve area gene pools. The city asked Van Atta to design 25 acres of open-space park so it would "look as though it had always been there." She rebuilt existing plant communities and created new ones based mostly on nearby habitats. For oak woodland habitat, she planted coast live oak, toyon, hummingbird sage, California rose, and snowberry. For oak savanna, she included wildflowers such as blue-eyed grass, California poppy, and lupine. She created a chaparral flower garden including plants found in the region but not necessarily on the site: Matilija poppy, purple and white sage, *Fremontodendron californicum*, and *Dendromecon rigida*. The park has bioswales, or wetlands, planted with *Salix exigua*, *Juncus* species, *Artemisia douglasiana*, and *Anemopsis californica* to create wildlife habitat and to clean water that runs off into a creek. Native bees have found plants they like in the park and have come back.

COURTESY VAN ATTA ASSOCIATES

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**LEFT**  
A meadow of annual grass pairs with coast live oaks to create oak savanna habitat.



In restoring the historic landscape in Montecito at the **Biltmore resort**, the owner, Ty Warner, wanted an exotic tropical landscape to lure Midwesterners to Southern California, which was the intention when the place first opened in 1927. The original landscape was designed by Ralph Stevens, a legendary Southern California plantsman and landscape architect, but when Van Atta became involved with the site, it had degenerated into mostly humdrum lawn, *Impatiens*, and kentia palms. Her design and planting plan for the 26-acre grounds is domestic in concept: A big front lawn faces the Pacific, and small terraces open off meeting rooms and bungalows. A majestic Monterey cypress and Canary Island date palms, thought to be more than 100 years old, have stayed on in tribute to the landscape's history. Nostalgic beds of roses and perennials such as *Erysimum* 'Bowles Mauve' evoke stately, vintage home gardens. Lush and colorful tropicals create the feeling of a remote getaway: giant bird of paradise, baubinia, Abyssinian banana (*Ensete ventricosum*), African tulip tree (*Spathodea campanulata*, widely grown in Hawaii but borderline in this climate) in a sheltered spot between bungalows, and gold medallion tree (*Cassia leptophylla*).



THE COMBINATIONS AT THE BILTMORE RUN FROM THE DOMESTIC TO THE EXOTIC.



Shrubs and Perennials

- Abutilon* *hyb.* 'Apricot Glow'
- Abutilon* *hyb.* 'Crimson Belle'
- Abutilon* *pictum* 'Thompsonii'
- Agapanthus* *x* 'Mormid'
- Alcornoque* *macrorrhiza*
- Alyogyne* *huegelii* 'Santa Cruz'
- Aucuba* *japonica* 'Mr. Goldstrike'
- Aucuba* *japonica* 'Serratifolia'
- Azalea* *indica* 'Monea'
- Bambusa* *oldhamii*
- Begonia* *foliosa*
- Brunfelsia* *magnifica*
- Camellia* *sp.*
- Ceanothus* *griseus* *horizontalis* 'Yankee Point'
- Ceanothus* *gloriosus* 'Heart's Desire'
- Clerodendrum* *ugandense*
- Clivia* *miniata* 'Monya'
- Cordyline* *fruticosa*
- Cycas* *revoluta*
- Dianella* *tesmanica*
- Dianella* *tesmanica* 'variegata'
- Doranthus* *palmeri*
- Echium* *candicans* 'Start of Madeira'
- Ensete* *ventricosum*
- Euphorbia* *dulcis* 'Edna's Chameleon'
- Fuchsia* *hyb.* 'Island Sunset'
- Gunnera* *tinctoria*
- Hydrangea* *macrophylla* 'Mariesii Variegata'
- Impatiens* *soderii*
- Ligularia* *tussilaginea* 'Aureo Maculata'
- Ligularia* *l.* 'Gigantea'
- Nandina* *domestica* 'Flum Passion'
- Phormium* *hyb.* 'Maori Chief'
- Phormium* *tenax*
- Ribes* *sanguineum* 'King Edward VII'
- Rosa* *x* 'Noala'
- Sentaria* *palmetolia*
- Zantedeschia* *aethiopia* 'hercules'

- Apricot Glow Abutilon
- Crimson Belle Abutilon
- Thompsonii Abutilon
- Mormid Agapanthus
- Giant Taro
- Blue Hibiscus
- Mr Goldstrike Aucuba
- Serratifolia Aucuba
- Monea Azalea
- Timber Bamboo
- Begonia
- Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow Camellia
- Yankee point Ceanothus
- Heart's Desire Ceanothus
- Blue Glory Bower
- Flame Lily
- Red/Green Cordyline
- Sago Palm
- Dianella
- Variegated Dianella
- Spear Lily
- Start of Madeira
- Abyssinian Banana
- Edna's Chameleon Euphorbia
- Island Sunset Fuchsia
- Gunnera
- Mariesii Hydrangea
- Pocos Man's Rhododendron
- Leopard Plant
- Giant Leopard Plant
- Nandina
- Maori Chief Phormium
- New Zealand Flax
- Red Flowering Currant
- Noala Rose
- Palm Grass
- Giant Calla



OPPOSITE

Courtyards were planted to evoke a lush sense of the tropics with three kinds of palms (kentia, fan, and pygmy date), Australian tree fern, and giant bird of paradise.

ABOVE

Van Atta's plan for the Biltmore restoration includes courtyards and planting beds at a home-garden scale.

LEFT

More of the tropics: Kentia palm is on the left, red bananas are on the right, and the low-clumping ground cover is palm grass.



**LEFT AND BELOW**  
Patios equipped with power, shade, and seating draw office staff outside to work among beds of yarrow, seaside daisy, and coralbells.

Van Atta's landscape design for Casa Nueva, a Santa Barbara County office building, makes use of natives and other low-maintenance plants for the sake of sustainability and a relatively low budget. But she has another motive with the project, which won a 2011 ASLA Professional Award: to draw employees outside to work, have meetings, and unwind and appreciate the place. Strategic plantings help the building meet its energy goals, primarily through shade and sun control. A dramatic trellis of shade fabric and wisteria stretches 330 feet long and shields the south and west sides of the building from seasonal heat; it also makes the building's green identity visible from a nearby highway, U.S. 101. Around a courtyard facade, vertical trellises are planted with native grapevines to cool the building in the summer and show their red foliage in fall. An old coast live oak has been preserved on the site amid a landscape of regionally native plants that thrive on scarce precipitation—about 16 inches annually. The plantings offer habitat to birds and other small animals, as well as comfortable spots for people. Beds of native perennials and annuals edge the patios, offering close-up views of California poppies, yarrow, and Santa Barbara daisy (*Erigeron karvinskianus*).



# FOREGROUND / PALETTE



**LEFT**  
The design for Van Atta's own landscape makes room for play and chickens along with water management and two green roofs.

**BELOW**  
A formal grid on the upper green roof consists of native succulents: dragon's blood sedum, bluff lettuce, and white stonecrop.

Van Atta's own landscape at home is a pilot site for the Sustainable Sites Initiative—the house was designed by her husband, the architect Ken Radtkey, and is LEED Platinum. The design shows her trust in native plants. "Everything is native or edible or both," she says. Hillside plantings include a native strawberry, *Fragaria vesca*, a ground cover that has miniature berries loaded with flavor; and shrubby golden currant (*Ribes aureum*), with yellow flowers in spring followed by yellow berries. She especially likes 'Bountiful Blue' blueberry, named for its bluish foliage; it does well in Santa Barbara and other places far outside the usual blueberry range.

Above the house's second floor, a vaulted living roof drains and stores rainwater in cisterns. The roof is planted with succulents (*Sedum album*, dragon's blood sedum, and native bluff lettuce or *Dudleya farinosa*) planted in a formal grid—it is not the usual pattern for California natives but is very effective. There's also a smaller, lower living roof planted with *Carex praegracilis*, a meadowy sedge, edged with seaside daisy and sand strawberry. Even the lawn is water efficient and native: Seaside bent (*Agrostis pallens*) grows in 14 inches of soil mix with an underground watering system. ●

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COURTESY VAN ATTA ASSOCIATES. PLAN: ANDREA JONES. PHOTO