HOME FRONT

In his private garden in California, designer Bernard Trainor explores new plants and possibilities

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In Brief:

- West facing coastal climate
- Drought-tolerant plants
- Monterey Cypress
- California, USA
- Sea Oats
- Sisal Agave
- Rhus styphantes
- Climatic: Mediterranean climate
- Soils: Shallow, well-drained soil
- Plant hardiness zones
- Hardiness varies (USDA 9a-

Redwood timber stairs lead from the upper level up to the house and guesthouse. The slope is planted with a diverse variety of succulents, including a spectacular Armeria, a garden hybrid, and Bernardo’s trailing, shrub, and perennial forms around the yard, all of which are drought-tolerant. Apart from pots, Bernardo does not water his plants once they are established.
though he has now settled in the USA, and comes originally from Australia, landscape designer. Bernard Trainor began to develop his core ideas about plants and place in Britain. As a young horticultural apprentice, he came to the UK to work with the late, great Beth Chatto, and his experience in her Essex garden was life changing. "I'd thought about planting for climate before, but working with Beth cemented those ideas," he says. "She was also just the best person, with incredible values and a real work ethic – she didn't just preach it, she lived it. Working there not only helped me with my garden design but also personally on every level. It still does. Every day, there's something in my work that reflects my time with her."

Bernard went on to study landscape design at Chelsea Physic Gardens, before returning down under, but it was in California, where he moved two decades ago, that he made his name. Having gored for a job, he met his wife and ended up staying and starting his own business. The projects that his practice Ground Studio creates show the influence of his early mentor in their approach. "I'm always interested in the specifics of a particular place," he says. "I try to decide what would be most appropriate and authentic for each site, and then consider the people who are going to live there, and the architecture they're going to live in."

Another major factor for him is drought tolerance – of all the Mediterranean climate regions, it is California that gets the least amount of summer rainfall. "It becomes not only about the look of a garden, but also what resources are needed to grow plants there."

This has been the foreboding of his aim over the past eight years as he created his own garden, perched high above the water of Carmel Bay on the coast of Monterey County. He had been living two hours' drive north in San Francisco when a new project began to bring him to the area regularly. "I realised that going there was the happiest day of my week. I loved the area so much. When the opportunity arose to buy this 1960s property with its acre of land and incredible views, I jumped at it. The house and guest house needed a little cosmetic work, but the garden was a blank slate, and that was a good thing, he says. "The reason I was buying the property was to create a garden, instead of inheriting somebody else's. It was a bit of a mess."

Designers often speak of the difficulty of being their own client, and Bernard was no different. "I started out thinking I would do something minimal, with fewer plant choices, but developed what I really wanted was to create a sort of laboratory where I could try things I wanted to use, a lot of shrubs, but without it looking busy, because gardens with too many plants can be visually jarring. That was my challenge – to grow lots of different plants, but in a cohesive way. I also tried to make it livable, so it would be comfortable for my family and visitors."

The garden is steeply sloping, and its layout is dictated by several changes in level. At the lowest level, there is a simple entry courtyard with water feature, and then a gateway to a beech [a game similar to hedges] court and seating area. Steps ascend up to the main level around the house and guest house, which have their own gardens. Bernard was judicious in his choice of materials, painting and restoring old bricks that were already on site, adding areas of crushed gravel, timber steps, and paving in sandstone and concrete.

These hard edges are softened with layers of textural planting drawn from all corners of the world – a panoply of forms and foliage, with a variety of shrubs, ground covers, and annuals. In the garden's main room, against soft grasses, choice perennials and anchoring shrubs, the emphasis is on creating dry climate, so apart from container, the plants survive without supplemental watering once they have established.

There were many mature trees in the garden when Bernard moved in, predominately California live oak (Quercus agrifolia), Monterey pine (Pinus radiata) and Monterey cypress (Cupressus macrocarpa). These natives manage without much rainfall, though they benefit in summer from the coastal fog that rolls off the bay – the water vapour settles on the leaves and then drips down, nourishing the ground below.

Choosing the rest of the planting was a challenge, not just because of the lack of rainfall, but because of underlying rock. Behind the house, there is less than a foot of soil to plant into, and what is there is technically old sand dune and exceptionally well draining, so planting on the slope has to be very water resilient. For his clients' gardens, Bernard uses native Californian plants, and also those from the four other Mediterranean zones in the world: the Mediterranean basin, South Africa, Australia, and central Chile. "It adds up to a pretty big palette of plants, with perhaps too many choices, which is always a good problem to have."

Even with this diverse choice, however, there is one big caveat – most Mediterranean-climate plants are summer deciduous, and that down in this period when the least amount of water is available. So, for his own garden, he turned this inherent challenge into an opportunity. "My garden looks best in winter, which is rare, and I have learned to celebrate a plant coming more alive in autumn and winter, but looking as if it is bursting a little in spring and summer. That has been the complete mindset change."

He also uses his beds and borders to trial new cultivars, to find out how drought tolerant they are, what size they grow to and how long they perform for. "I experiment with growing things in new ways too," he explains. "I might shape something or clip it more than I would in a client's garden, so see how it looks. It's all about stretching myself as a designer. I'm always offering things."

The garden is also Bernard's own personal retreat. "I love just pottering around", he says. "Much of my time here is spent gardening or painting. This is where I get my satisfaction."
World tour

This combination of Agave attenuata 'Hernia' (2) from Mexico, the grass-like reed Thrinaxoras insignis (3) and Aloe mucronat (4) from South Africa, and Aeonium atropurpureum (5) from the Canary Islands is typical of the experimental schemes in Bernard’s garden, where he mixes plants from all five Mediterranean-climate regions. His aim is to create complex plantings with cultivars that wouldn’t usually be seen together, in a visually pleasing, cohesive design. “From this garden, I feel I have learnt a lot about using very different groups of plants together in very effective ways,” he says.

Blue ideas

In this area, the joints between sandstone pavers are filled with Drymenia mongolica (1). The path leads past a pot overflowing with Australian ‘Mint Sauce’ (2), and low-growing plants including the spreading, pink-flowered Pelargonium fragans (3) and a bright-blue Echium candicans seedling (4). One of several seedlings that popped up in Bernard’s garden. It has been selected to be propagated and named. Bernard often uses his garden to breed and trial new plants, and plant-lovers regularly come to collect cuttings or seeds of his plants and develop them into new cultivars.

Light fantastic

Bernard is always aware of the light when designing planting. The sun sets behind this area by the house and backlights the plants, including the row of Crassula ovata (2) along the wall, Puya raimondii (4), used as groundcover, and sedum plants (4). It also illuminates the rectangular water feature, with three bubbling fountains that make ripples. Alongside this, Bernard made a feature out of an outcrop of Carrara stone. “People thought I was crazy washing it down to expose it, but they all love it now.” The sandstone paving in the garden was chosen to complement this existing rock.

Texture and form

Bernard’s focus is on texture and form in his planting schemes. Here the taller shrubs Arbutus unedo (2) is combined with spreading groundcover Acrisousphylo densiflora ‘Emerald Carpet’ (2), spicy Agave attenuata (2), the grass Mahobisar barbata (4) and a backdrop of Dianthus officinalis ‘Tuscany Blue’ (9). He builds up contrasting shapes in height to create interest and draw visitors through the garden. “It is all about texture and form, and foliage shape, colour and seasonal interest,” he says. “I do think about flower combinations, but that is very much second fiddle – flower colour comes afterwards for me.”
16 KEY PLANTS

1. *Muhlenbergia pluricostosa*
A drought-tolerant, semi-evergreen grass that creates soft mounds of iridescent blue foliage with a weeping habit and pointy bristle flowers in autumn. 90cm. RHS H4, USDA 6b-8b.

2. *Aeonium canariense*
A beautiful succulent ground cover for full sun rosettes. The foliage spreads and reaches 30cm high, but taller, crumpled yellow flower spikes emerge in spring. 30cm. ARB, USDA 9b-11.

3. *Silene species* from Chile
This ornamental grass, related to Mexican feather grass, is one of many plants trimmed as a hedge in his garden.

4. *Aloe greenei*
From South Africa, this species has spiky, spiky leaves and tall, glossy flowers in autumn. 30cm. RHS H3, USDA 6b-11.

5. *Cotyledon ‘Mint Truffles’*
A succulent and a perfect ground cover, this plant is grown as a ground cover, with many leaves and a unique texture. 40cm. RHS H4, USDA 9b-11.

6. *Dymondia margaretae* 
A groundcover for full sun, this plant is a carpet of bright green leaves without irrigation. It can be used as a groundcover or as an edging plant. 30cm. RHS H4, USDA 9b-11.

7. *Pittosporum crassifolium*
An evergreen shrub from New Zealand with thick, downy grey foliage and dark red flowers. Self-same to grow for coastal gardens. 1.2m. RHS H4, USDA 6b-20b.

8. *Cotyledon orbiculata var. olivacea*
The succulent has smooth silver-gray pointed leaves that contrast with its coral red blossoms. These blooms appear continuously throughout the season. 1.2m. RHS H3, USDA 9b-11.

9. *Aloe ‘Rosaspampe’*
A hybrid breed in South Africa, its African name translates as “Red Fading Hood.” The orange yellow flowers branch up from dense clusters of green rosettes all year. 30cm. RHS H4, USDA 9a-12.

10. *Elaeis guineensis* ‘El Campo’
The compact tree-like pot plant has multiple dark green stems banded with brown bracts and ending in dark chocolate-coloured flowerheads. 30cm. ARB, USDA 9b-11.

11. *Dudleya hasseltii*
A low-growing succulent plant with glossy grey-blue leaves that turn on to a beautiful pink in late summer growth. Grows in full sun. 30cm. RHS H3, USDA 9a-11.

12. *Viburnum doocea* (H. = “Weeds”)
A short shrub that works well in full sun or partial shade, this plant is known for its dark green foliage and central flower clusters. 30cm. RHS H3, USDA 9b-11.

13. *Leucophyta brownii*
A low-growing alpina with light green, silvery-blue foliage, originally from Australia. It is attractive to bees and other pollinators. 50cm. RHS H4, USDA 9a-11.

14. *Echeveria pulvinata*
A short, thick-leaved succulent with light green leaves covered in velvety smooth fine hairs. Rosettes of orange flowers appear in late winter. 30cm. ARB, USDA 6b-11.

15. *Crassula ilicifolia* (H. = “Weeds”)
Known as the evergreen tree, its unique form has interesting form foliage growing in opposite pairs on brown stems. 30cm. RHS H3, USDA 10a-11.

16. *Aeonium ‘gama’ hybrid*
Another alpina like in the spring garden, selected from seeds that spontaneously occurred. He hopes this will become a new cultivar that can be propagated for care in the future.
The garden is the top level between the house and the surrounding landscape. It's a place where I experiment with growing things in new ways: it's about stretching myself as a designer.