

Laura Morton shares her 30-year journey designing, editing, and tending to her garden, which serves as both a laboratory and retreat.

GARDEN MAKER

Written by
Laura Morton





Left: The chalky white walls and vibrant blues create a serene yet lively setting for outdoor gatherings. **Bottom:** Moroccan-inspired tiles are a nod to the Southern Mediterranean influences that shaped the architecture of Ozeta House.



We acquired Ozeta House in 1994, a 1921 earthquake prototype structure presumed to have been designed by modernist architect Irving Gill. The home, built from formed concrete, was an intriguing canvas that immediately drew me in. Its simple cubic geometry, reminiscent of southern Mediterranean architecture from places like Morocco and Greece, provided a perfect setting to begin what would become a decades-long design project. At that time, my passion for landscape design was just blossoming as I began formal studies in horticultural

and landscape architecture at UCLA. This garden became both my experimental playground and classroom, a place where I could test design theory, build a dream garden, and explore the relationship between form and plant life.

Over the years, this garden has continued to serve me as a laboratory—a place for experimenting with plant combinations and practicing observation and discovery. Watching how different design elements interact over time has taught me invaluable lessons, lessons that have become fundamental tools in my work as a professional designer.

The journey of tending to and transforming the garden has been one of constant learning. Every season brings new challenges and opportunities. I've reconceived areas, added

an entertaining pavilion, and made significant planting adjustments over time. Today, the garden at Ozeta House feels like a living entity that I know intimately. It's an environment that both reflects and marks the passage of time in ways I could never have imagined. More than that, it has become my constant guide, offering insights into patience, creativity, and the delicate balance between order and wildness.

FINDING ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Adding artistic elements into a landscape is an invitation to personalize a space. These additions create visual cues that guide visitors, encouraging deeper exploration and making the space feel fun and relatable. Gardens, after all, are crafted environments; they are meant to evoke nature but serve as transitional spaces for the spirit.

These elements reflect my personality, tastes, travels, and memories. Before officially becoming a landscape designer, I was drawn to creating original things—fashion, furniture, jewelry, and photography. I loved working with different materials and finding ways to bring them together in new and interesting combinations. My garden has become an extension of this creative process. I am always seeking subtle relationships between materials and plants and observing how they evolve together over time.

I particularly enjoy when art in the garden connects to craftsmanship, where you can feel the human ges-

ture. It's also important to me that there's an element of ephemerality, something to discover and pause over that may reveal itself only at certain times, like ephemeral bulbs, a bloom cycle, or a shift in leaf color. This dynamic connection keeps the garden engaging without overwhelming the senses.

Incorporating whimsical details serves both as structural elements and as focal points, reminding me of the joy and wonder that gardens



Top: A wrought iron dragonfly sculpture, made by Laura, hovers above a lush mix of succulents and contrasting, dark foliage.
Bottom: This intimate, shaded nook in the east garden, where layers of texture and light create a tranquil, almost mystical atmosphere.



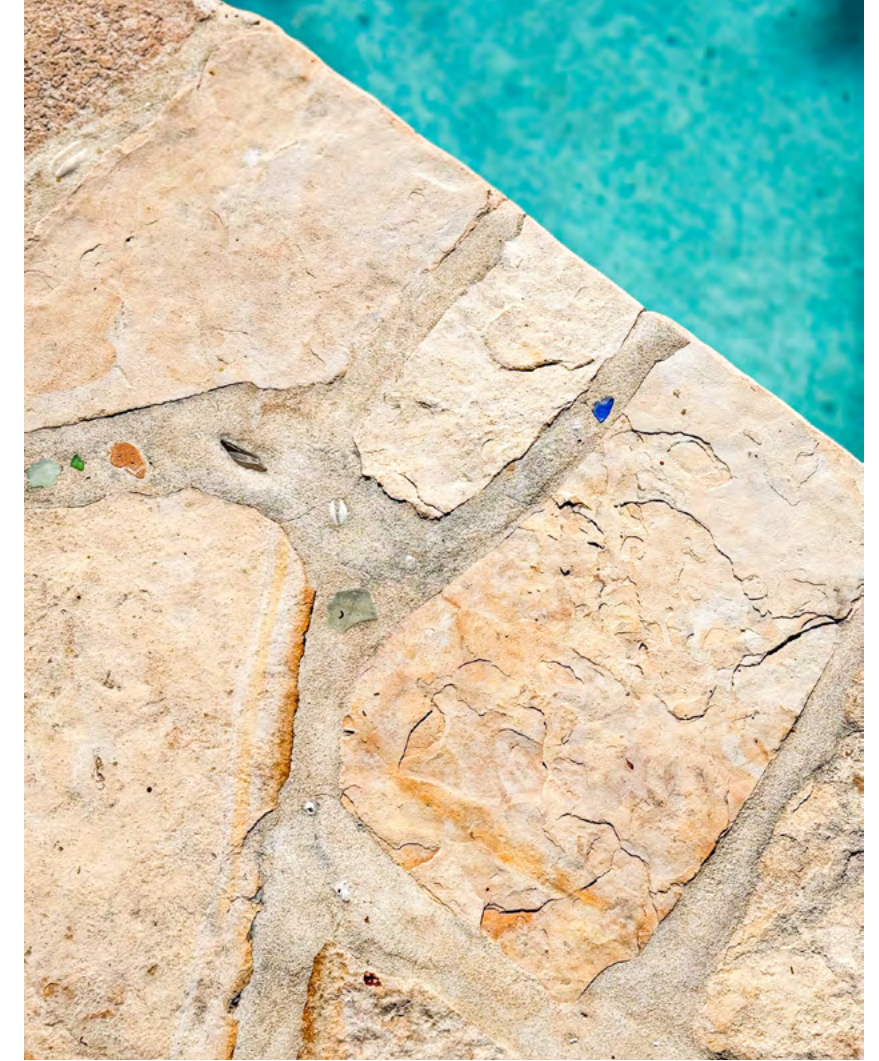
can spark in the imagination. One example is the jeweled dragonflies I crafted early in my career. Originally designed for a reflecting pond installation in 2001, these powder-coated dragonflies with iridescent beaded wings play with light and reflection. I now keep a couple of them in my garden, moving them occasionally to enhance different areas and add a sense of movement.

CRAFTING UNIQUE ELEMENTS

One of the most significant transformations at Ozeta House was replacing the original 1970s red brick pool deck. While searching for an alternative, I found creamy white flagstone reminiscent of rocks on a windswept Greek island. Its soft, worn surface felt timeless, suiting



Current page: The outdoor dining area at dusk, with bespoke design details like a rooftop lined with vintage insulators and whitewashed carved paneling along the dining table. **Right:** A close-up of the poolside stonework, featuring hand-placed sea glass and shells embedded into the grout.



both the house's architecture and the Mediterranean aesthetic I envisioned.

For the grout, I took a more playful approach. My family and I had collected sea glass and shells from various beach walks, and I decided to integrate these into the stonework. Working alongside the masons, I began to "jewel the grout," embedding the glass and shells in a way that felt both intentional and accidental. I wanted it to feel as though we were installing this on a distant island, where treasures from the sea naturally found their way into the stone. It's especially delightful to see children notice these details first, reminding me of the joy in discovery. Over time, some shells have broken, but their imprints remain, becoming part of the garden's evolving story.

To address drainage needs, I later removed low sections of the deck and filled the gaps with turquoise pebbles set on edge. This modification added another layer of color and texture, blending function with beauty.

LIVING SCULPTURES

Creating topiary and espalier has also been a meaningful aspect of this garden. Inspired by my studies with Jan Smithen at the Los Angeles Arboretum, I became fascinated with shaping plants into living sculptures. Topiary is a long-term commitment; it requires patience and a deep understanding of plant growth patterns. I've experimented with many species, pruning and shaping them into forms that sometimes evolve, re-wild, and are then refined again.

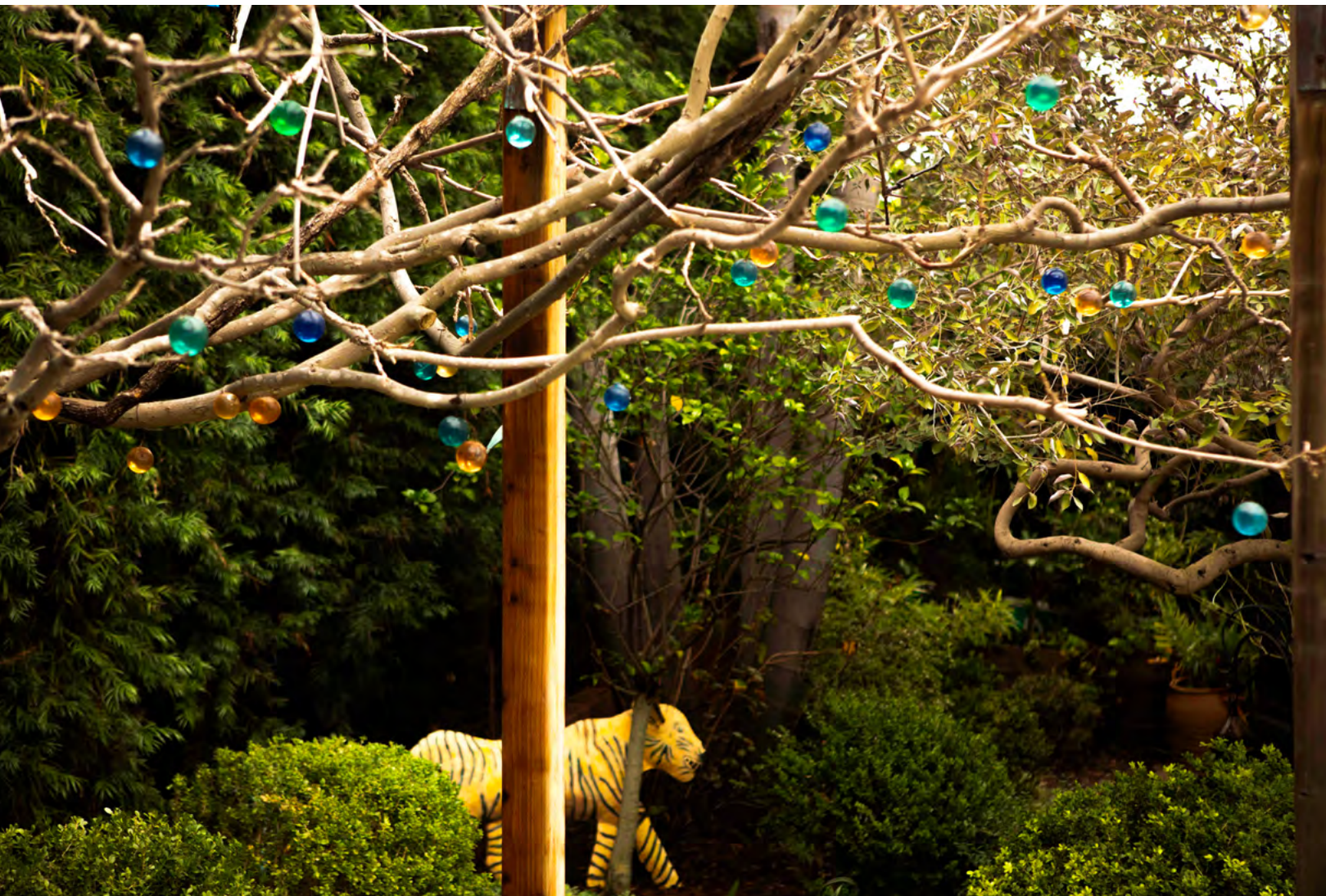
One of my proudest achievements is the *Wisteria sinensis* 'Rosea', which I have lovingly shaped over 27 years. Trained into a spiraling double helix, it forms a doorway between the

citrus orchard and the shade garden. Throughout the seasons, it offers different experiences—in spring, cascading racemes fill the air with fragrance; by summer, it is joined by clusters of *Ampelopsis* berries in indigo, seafoam, and magenta, which the birds adore. In winter, stripped bare, it reveals clusters of acrylic balls that glow like colorful bubbles in the light, drawing attention to the vine's sinewy form.

Challenges have been part of the process as well. A few years ago, the wisteria's support structure began to collapse, requiring careful re-training of the vines. This task was humbling, reminding me that a garden is never truly finished. It exists in the moment, and sometimes it demands a willingness to start anew.



Opposite Page: A tiger statue peeks from beneath the bare Wisteria, with colorful glass orbs hanging from its vines. **Top:** Shaped and nurtured for 27 years, a beautifully trained *Wisteria sinensis* 'Rosea' in full bloom, cascading along the wooden trellis. **Bottom:** *Ampelopsis brevipedunculata* (Porcelain Berry Vine) with its striking multicolored berries that echo the colors and forms of its surroundings.

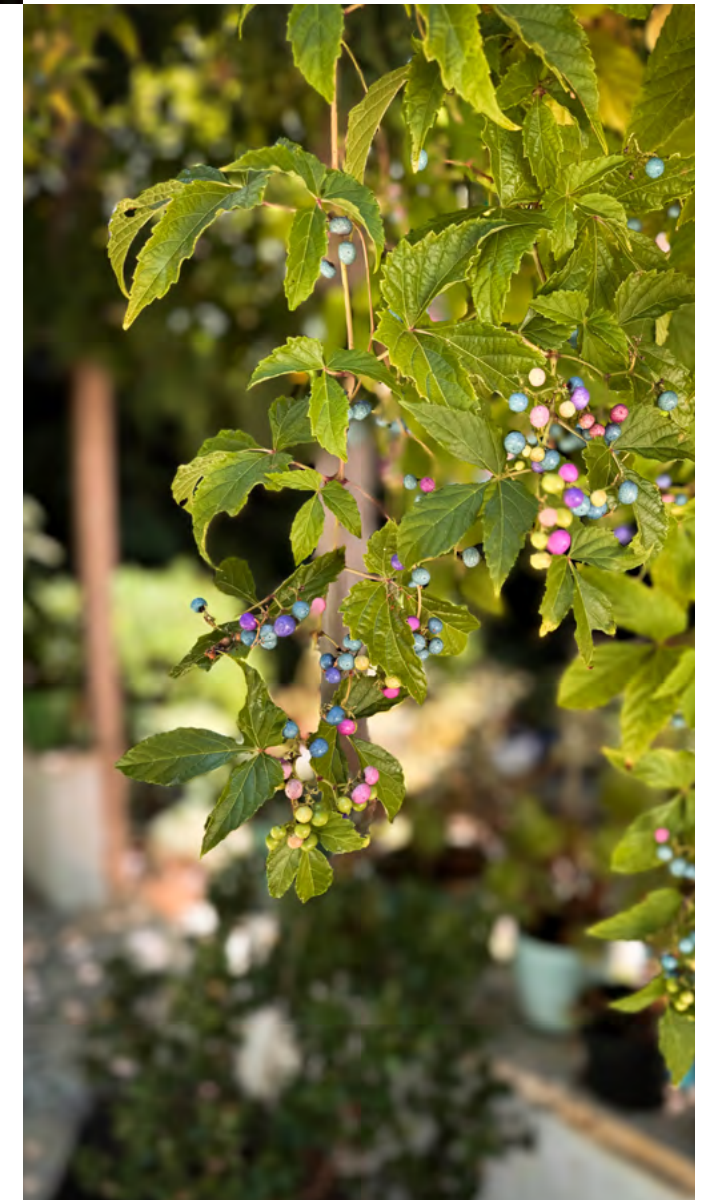


LEARNING AND ADAPTING THROUGH TIME

In the early years at Ozeta House, I found myself navigating the complexities of landscape building, often by trial and error. Those initial challenges accelerated my learning and grounded me in the essentials of creating a thriving garden.

I've learned that gardening is a blend of planning and experience. In my garden, I have the freedom to dream and test ideas against my education and instincts. Not everything has been successful, but having a space for experimentation has built my confidence and taught me invaluable lessons—succession planting, pest management, and plant resilience, to name a few.

However, editing the garden is an ongoing challenge. As it grows, its scale changes, and sometimes the original vision becomes obscured. As a natural collector, I find that “too much” can happen easily. I periodically have to put on my designer hat and give myself a consult, editing with a disciplined hand. This struggle, though challenging, is essential. Good design and thoughtful editing contribute to a harmonious space that feels full yet not overwhelming.





"I want to see the birds, the insects, the lizards darting through the foliage, and feel a sense of wonder at the beauty of it all."



Above: A vintage metal watering can placed beside a beautifully arranged stone path with blue pebbles filling the joints. **Bottom:** The entertaining pavilion with natural gas fire pit. **Right:** Bright blue, concrete jays perched over the tea garden towers.

A GARDEN THAT CONTINUES TO TEACH

Thirty years in, the garden at Ozeta House feels like an extension of me. I've spent decades observing its rhythms, learning its needs, and adapting my design to match the changes that time and nature bring. It's more than just a garden—it's a space that has taught me patience, humility, and the value of persistence. Every time I walk through it, I'm reminded of the balance between control and letting go. In the end, the garden has its own way of teaching me what it needs, and that relationship has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my career.

One of the greatest joys I find in the garden is its ability to stir the senses and evoke emotion. When I walk through the garden, I want to feel distracted, intrigued, and alive.



I want to see the birds, the insects, the lizards darting through the foliage, and feel a sense of wonder at the beauty of it all. Gardens are living spaces, and they require time and thoughtfulness to truly flourish. Through trial and error, patience, and constant observation, I've learned to embrace the garden's imperfections, knowing that they are part of its—and my—journey.

Laura is currently stewarding a growing number of her garden projects—feeling grateful to be trusted to adjust the designs over time.

LAURAMORTONDESIGN.COM

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