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Fixer-upper

North County garden goes from exasperating to exquisite

By LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
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Deborah Meade is a gardening superhero. The one-third-acre property surrounding her charming ranch-style home in Santa Ynez has presented so many problems over the years that less determined sorts would've long ago thrown in the trowel and called it quits. But Mrs. Meade, 67, has never met a gardening quandary she couldn't unravel with patience, planning and plenty of know-how.

When she and husband Tom moved in 28 years ago, they faced the all-too-common homeowner's dilemma of grass, grass and more grass covering every square inch of plantable earth, with the added bonus of 50 rose bushes marching dutifully around the perimeter of the house. Back in the '90s, lawns and roses were residential landscaping mainstays, but over the years, as water became an increasingly scarce commodity, Mrs. Meade began to suspect that there might be a smarter way to garden.

Recognizing that she had big problems to solve was the first step, but knowing how to solve those problems was another matter entirely.

"I had recently retired from a high-pressure position in pharmaceutical sales, so I finally had the time to volunteer. My grandparents were farmers and my father was a landscape architect, so I grew up around plants and was familiar with them, but I didn't really know where to start when it came to redoing my entire yard."

Fortunately, she discovered the Master Gardener program in 2015 and quickly started finding answers to her questions.

"During the training, I learned how to research which plants do well here. Before,

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The back patio is built around a beloved olive tree.
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I would buy whatever I saw in the nursery, I'd put it in the ground and hope it would grow. Then I learned how important it is to do your homework first. The information is out there — you just need to know where to look."

Armed with her newfound horticultural expertise, Mrs. Meade set about tackling her troublesome landscape, starting with the steeply sloped front and side yards. The lawn came out and was replaced with hardscaping, gravel and bark mulch, and the old pop-up sprinklers gave way to a drip irrigation system. New plantings include 'Emerald Carpet' manzanita, Indian hawthorn and low-growing Carex ground cover. A glorious 'Happy Wanderer' Hardenbergia provides a vivid splash of purple against the white house — a color scheme echoed by purple fountain grass, purple and white lantana, society garlic, grape hyacinths and native 'Winifred Gilman' salvia.

The side yard features an edible landscape of plums, apricots and apples, as well as a number of dwarf olives and Marina madrones. At the far edge of the property, a wide swath of California poppies puts on a spectacular show each spring, and many of Mrs. Meade's existing rose bushes that managed to survive the makeover are covered in fragrant, multi-colored blossoms. "They're picky, but I love roses, so I saved as many of them as I could."

Once the front yard was done to her liking, it was time to tackle another steep slope in the backyard. In fact, the rear of their lot was so high that Mrs. Meade had to get a running start from the house just to make it all the way up to the fence line! Her solution involved a major excavation project, followed by the installation of a stone retaining wall built in sections of varying heights to accommodate the changing grade. The wall curves gracefully around the rear of the property and includes a short flight of stairs in the middle for easy up-and-down access. Another problem solved.

Planted in the new raised bed between the wall and the fence are a series of Arbutus unedo, or strawberry trees, spaced far enough apart to allow them to reach their eventual mature size without crowding. The evergreen shrubs are accompanied by native coffeeberries and California sagebrush and more clumps of purple-flowered society garlic. These hardy perennials somehow managed to survive having 6 inches of soil mistakenly dumped on them during construction, and Mrs. Meade was amazed and delighted to see some of her favorite plants reappear good as new.

Another favorite is native yellow monkeyflower, which she had planted along the edge of the retaining wall and also uses as an accent in a most unusual container. Mrs. Meade bought a horse trough at the local feed store, spray-painted it copper, and filled it with walking onions. This Egyptian vegetable got its curious nickname from the habit of developing bulbs at the tips of its seed stalks, which then bend over and take root, thus



From top to bottom, the renovation takes the backyard down to dirt; a curved stone retaining wall solves the steeply sloped backyard; and purple blooms of Hardenbergia 'Happy Wanderer' cover the wooden trellis.

DEBORAH MEADE PHOTO

"walking" all over the garden if not held in check.

A southern exposure makes the backyard an ideal spot for Meyer lemon, lime, clementine, pomegranate and pineapple guava trees. The raised vegetable bed behind the garage contains four tomato plants, one each of Burbank, Early Girl, Genuwine and Sweet Million, as well as Spanish roja garlic, chives, Japanese eggplant, jalapeño peppers, zucchini and crookneck squash, and an abundance of culinary herbs.

The wide swath of green grass is an improved variety that offers all the benefits of old-fashioned turf with a more eco-friendly profile. Sustainability is further enhanced by Claire, the resident rescue tortoise and four-legged lawn mower. Claire is partial to the grass but also enjoys snacking on Mrs. Meade's juicy aloe vera plants, while carefully avoiding the more treacherous pincushion agaves and red yuccas.

The large patio was carefully designed around a 15-year-old fruitless olive tree that Mrs. Meade was determined to preserve as a dramatic focal point. The multi-trunked tree is perfectly suited to the site, drought-tolerant, needs little maintenance, and provides much-needed shade during the hot summer months. In addition, it provides the mature height and visual impact that will take years for its newly planted colleagues to achieve.

Mrs. Meade is a garden problem-solver extraordinaire. Her handsome landscape is proof positive that she has learned her lessons well, and she has some advice for anyone who would like to follow in her footsteps but may be hesitant to make the leap on their own: "Ask a Master Gardener!"

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Linda Sullivan Baity is program coordinator for the UC Master Gardeners of Santa Barbara County. Do you have questions about your home garden for the Master Gardeners? Contact the Helpline by calling 893-3485 or emailing anmgsb@ucanr.edu. To find more gardening resources, go tocesantabarbara.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardener or www.facebook.com/sbmastergardeners.



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