



# LASTEJAS

PETER AND STEPHANIE SPERLING RESTORE A HORTICULTURAL TREASURE

by JOAN TAPPER photographs by LISA ROMEREIN

There are seasons in any garden, cycles of vivid bloom followed by periods of quietude, then—if conditions are right—a flowering once again. Happily, the gardens of Las Tejas, one of Montecito's fabled estates, have entered another spring. The formal Renaissance-style design, which dates to 1917, shines with renewed brilliance, thanks to the commitment of philanthropists Peter and Stephanie Sperling, who acquired the 26-acre property close to eight years ago. The estate's centerpiece is a classic vista that instantly transports a visitor to 16th-century Italy. From the triple-arched veranda of the house, you look out to a backdrop of ocean and islands, but in between, there's a series of cascading terraces, basins, pools, and manicured lawns that ends in a lotus pond with its own small triple-arched pavilion. The scene is a masterpiece of symmetry. The curves over the balcony are echoed in the oval walls of the descending stone pools. Venerable stands of yew, cypress, and Eugenia wall off pairs of garden "rooms." Boxwood hedges nearly a century old, hand pruned into undulating and scrollwork shapes, offset the orderly rows of trees, while two pergolas supported by spiral wooden pillars and draped with decades-old wisteria balance each other along the sides. Even the views of the house and the plantings are mirrored in the unrippled water of the reflecting pools.

It has taken a dedicated garden staff several years to bring the plantings back under control. When the Sperlings moved in, the hedges were overgrown and bare spaces needed to be filled in. Even now, the gnarled trunks of the cypresses are visible instead of being covered by foliage down to the ground. It looks like gorgeous living sculpture to a casual visitor, though a landscape designer might not approve. Yet it was a conscious decision on the part of Stephanie to retain the original trees rather than to pull them out and replace them—or worse, to redesign the estate entirely.

"Never, ever, did we think of changing anything," she notes. "We loved it and wanted to restore the gardens." She rescued classical statuary and stonework from a rubble heap where they'd been left to deteriorate and, where possible, put them back in their intended spots. The urns that flank one pool, for example, are again filled with agaves, similar to those that were there almost a century ago. It is a way of acknowledging the landmark quality of the estate, accepting responsibility for the care and restoration of a valuable horticultural treasure.

The story of Las Tejas predates the history of the garden. William Alston Haynes Jr. built a gracious adobe home, with an interior courtyard, for his bride here in 1898, topping it with some 8,500 tiles. (He obtained them by trading lighter shingles to Santa Barbara residents who wanted to replace their heavy, sagging roofs, thus accounting for the house's name.) Not long after the residence was finished, however, a shortage of funds caused Haynes to sell it to his brother; for almost two decades after that, the house was rented out to visiting easterners.

In 1917, Oakleigh and Helen Thorne of Millbrook, New York, bought Las Tejas as a winter home and hired Francis W. Wilson to remodel it. As his inspiration, the Santa Barbara architect used the villa of Caprarola, built by Vignola for Cardinal Alessandro Farnese from 1547 to 1559, in Viterbo, Italy. Wilson added a second story to part of the house and significantly altered the south façade, adding the three signature arches over the veranda. Helen Thorne, who had spent years making a showpiece of her East Coast gardens, oversaw the design for the Las Tejas grounds. Actually, she did more than over-

# HOMES & GARDENS

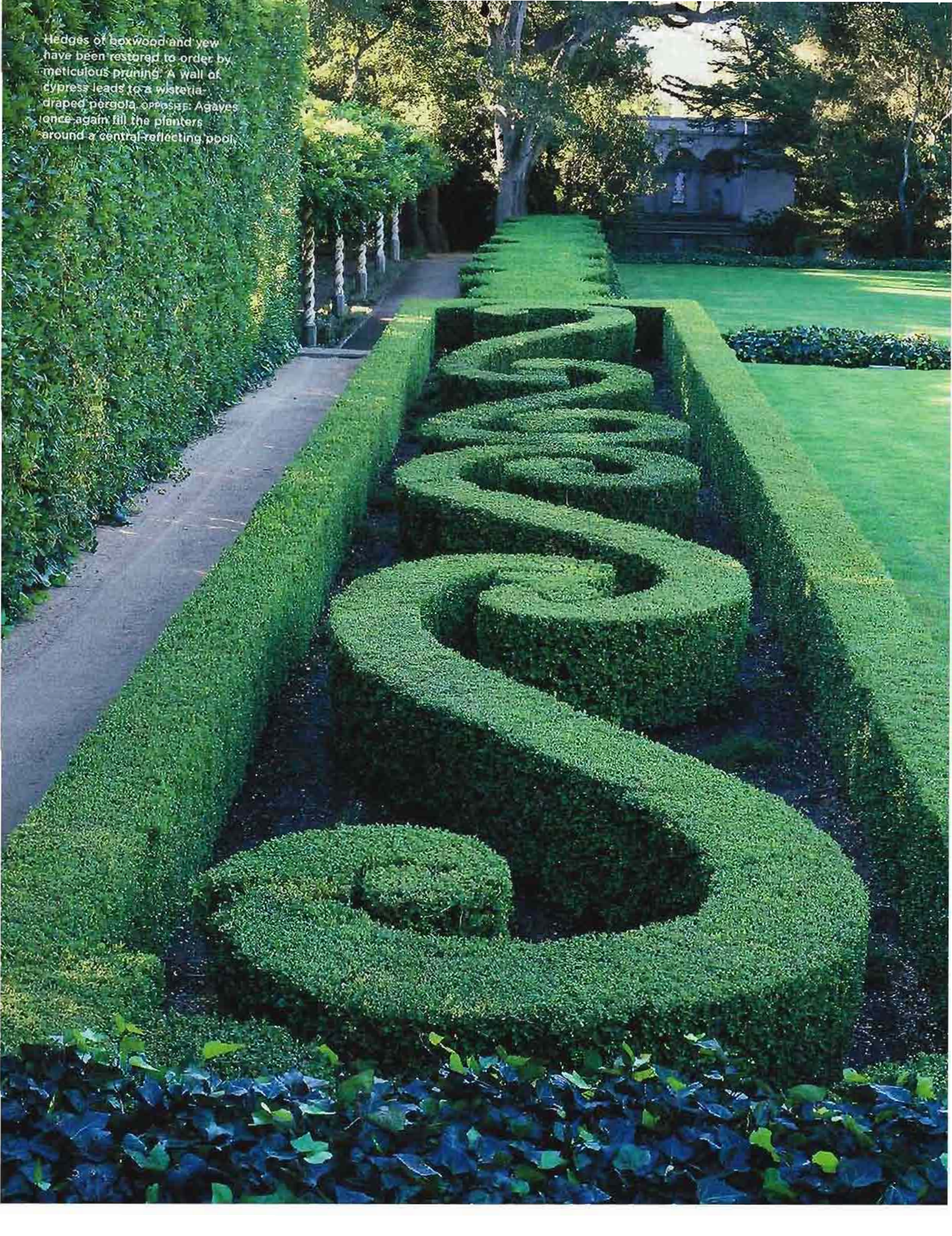






Equipped in metal, a tree  
graces an outer wall of the  
house (left), one of Helen  
Thayer's original decorative  
touches. Meticulous repair work  
and function mesh in the ele-  
gant symmetry of Los Tejas.  
Designed in 1917 to resemble an  
Italian Renaissance estate,  
the ponds and plantings were  
altered to water conservation.

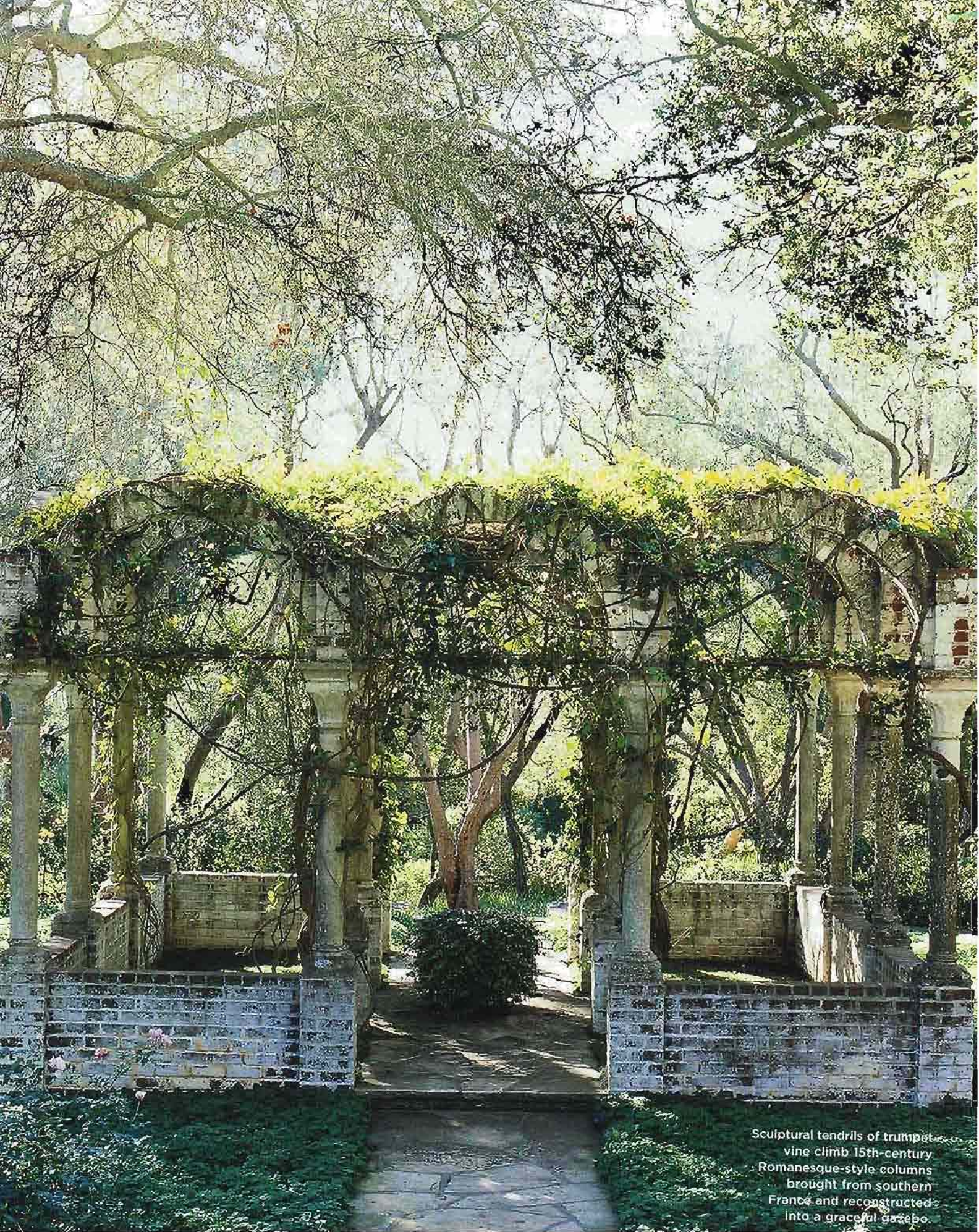
Hedges of boxwood and yew have been restored to order by meticulous pruning. A wall of cypress leads to a wisteria-draped pergola, opposite, Agaves once again fill the planters around a central reflecting pool.





see. She could handle surveyors' tools herself and had the foresight to understand the need for water conservation in Southern California, which led her to plant drought-resistant shrubs and rely on formal hedges rather than irregular borders. The Thornes' garden soon rivaled those of great European villas. Helen bought classical statues and architectural features and used them as focal points throughout the grounds. She installed a marble Kuan Yin, Chinese goddess of compassion, at the pavilion near the lotus pond. Winsome stone maidens representing the four seasons centered four smaller side gardens. Nymphs and fauns welcomed visitors near the house's entrance. In another grove, she constructed an arched gazebo out of 15th-century Romanesque-style columns from southern France. Helen established a large rose garden and put in a cutting garden of wildflowers, a rock garden, and, later, a Japanese garden with stone lanterns around a koi-stocked pond.

In 1926, the Thornes commissioned George Washington Smith to make other changes to the house, which included redoing the front entrance and adding a retractable glass roof over the inner courtyard. After that, the couple continued to travel back and forth from Montecito to Millbrook, until



Sculptural tendrils of trumpet vine climb 15th-century Romanesque-style columns brought from southern France and reconstructed into a graceful gazebo.

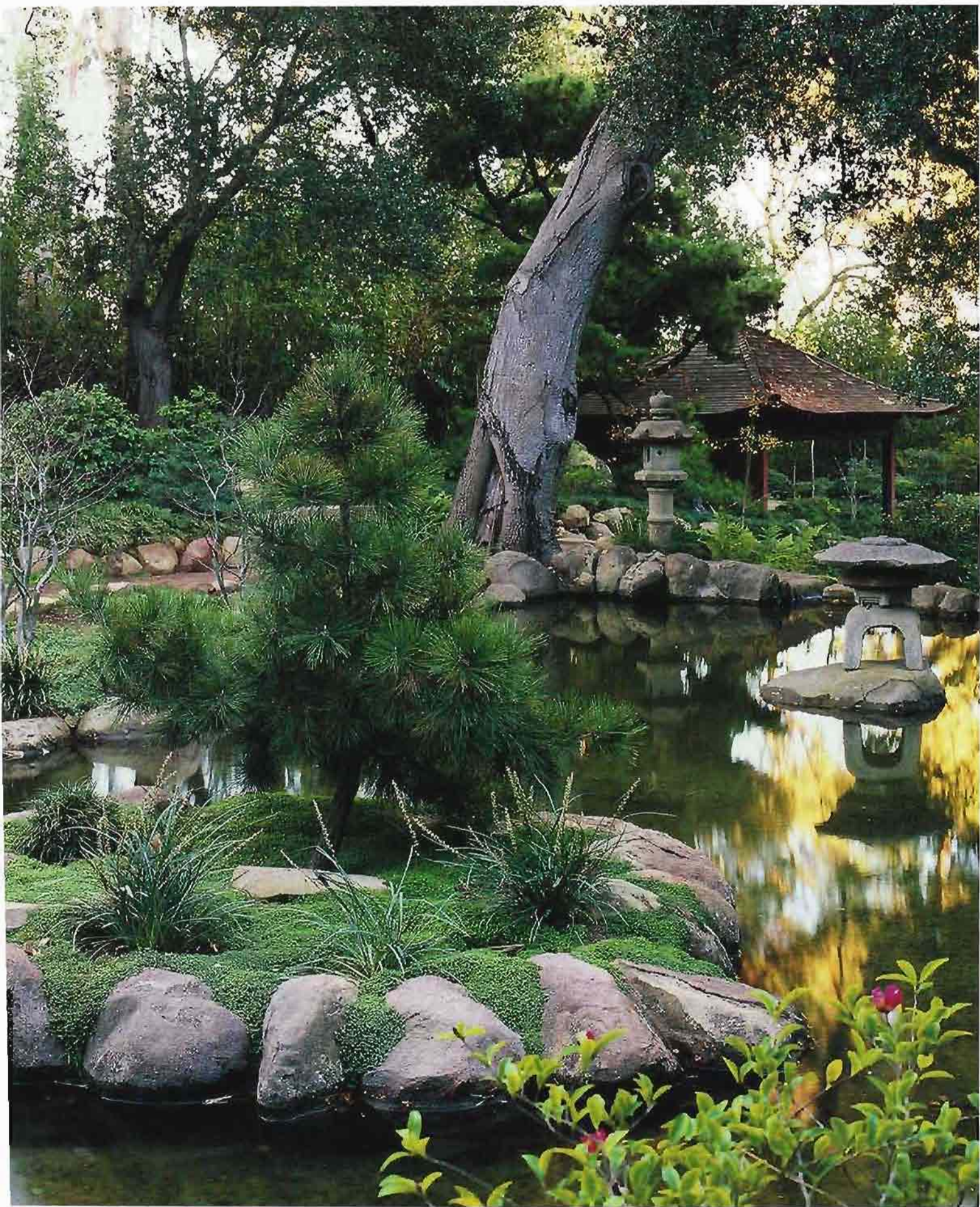








Las Tejas abounds in outdoor  
rooms, furnished with a stone  
obelisk (THIS PAGE) perhaps, or  
(OPPOSITE TOP LEFT) a seasonal  
goddess bearing sheaves of  
wheat, OPPOSITE (CLOCKWISE FROM  
TOP RIGHT): Tile work in the Spanish  
Garden, a stone lion at the  
gate, a fish frieze on a fountain.





Horticultural gems gleam  
once more with water features.  
Cycads stand out in the  
fern garden. OPPOSITE: A black  
pine takes center stage in  
the Japanese garden.



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: Her features still delicately evocative, a marble Kuan Yin exudes the compassion for which she's revered in Asia. Framed by classical columns, the statue looks out at the lotus pond, where the namesake plants bloom alongside water lilies and tano.



shaken by the attack on Pearl Harbor, they suddenly sold their California estate to Frederick and Caroline Leadbetter for a mere \$40,000.

Over the next decades, Las Tejas slowly declined. By the time Caroline Leadbetter died there in 1972, at the age of 102, the house badly needed upkeep and modernization, and the grounds showed signs of neglect. The next owners, Teri and Manuel Rojas, who bought the property in 1973, responded by adding plumbing and new wiring, renovating the rooms, clearing and pruning the gardens—and holding some memorable solstice parties during the following 15 years.

In 1988, Las Tejas changed hands again, and after a few more years was sold once more. Meanwhile, the depredations of the grounds grew worse and worse. The great Renaissance garden needed its own renaissance.

As benefactors of the preserve at Ellwood Mesa—which now carries their name—and donors to the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County, the Sperlings had a longstanding interest in nature and conservation. Before the couple took on Las Tejas, they were familiar with the property's illustrious history. The contemporary picture, however, was grim. At some point, the extensive rose garden had been torn out and replaced with lawn, statuary had been removed, ponds and waterfalls had dried up. Though the bones of the garden could be detected in some places, other areas were a devastated ruin. Yet the new owners never considered changing the original design. The goal was to restore the gardens. Notes Stephanie, "The Smithsonian provided us with many great [historical] photos," which helped their research. Working with several landscape architects, she began to recreate the lost horticultural gems.

One of those is the fern garden, now a soothing shady glade with a path that crosses a burbling stone-lined watercourse past an explosion of maidenhair ferns. A towering array of giant bird of paradise plants—one of the largest stands in Montecito—is a holdover from Helen Thorne's original plantings. Newer additions are the mature cycads, impressive specimens that rise from a ground cover of Australian violet.

Another major feat of restoration is the Japanese garden, which began to be reinstalled about five years ago. The riverbed had gone completely dry. Only the hardscape and a bit of bamboo were left, along with stout stone lanterns. Today lush tufts of mondo grass sculpt the ground, and delicate Japanese maples are interspersed with camellias. A small black pine adds interest to an island, while overhead, oaks, sycamores, and several California redwoods dapple the sunlight that reaches through their branches. Six kinds of bamboo—golden goddess, Mexican weeping, Oldhamui, Chusquea, blue Himalayan, and black—vary the edges of a garden that reveals surprises at every turn. The entire estate is managed organically—free of pesticides and helped by beneficial insects—another testament to the strength of Helen Thorne's vision for her garden.

Throughout the grounds, her spirit—and the Sperlings' resolution to honor it—is evident. You see it in the sunny glade of the cutting garden, where decomposed granite paths were first put in for donkey carts (so someone could ride down from the house to gather a bouquet); in the brick arches of the Romanesque gazebo now entwined with a dense trumpet vine; in the Four Seasons gardens, planted with vegetables, herbs, and blooms that indeed change from summer to fall to winter and spring.

In the pavilion near the lotus pond, in the 1920s, Helen Thorne hung a poem wrought in metal script. The words belong to one Mrs. Basil Taylour: "Tis not my garden by real ownership/Nor yet because my genius [sic] made its Art/But cherished by my love and tenderness/That place is mine which lives within my heart." But it remains the perfect inscription for this spot—a garden for all seasons that is blossoming again. ■





Terraced lawns and pools ascend toward the arched balcony of Las Tejas, reflecting a rare harmony of architecture and nature.