Without limits

A carefully understated garden designed by Ron Lutsko in California’s Portola Valley takes its cues from the gently rolling landscape and non-native grasses of the region’s 19th-century pasture-land heritage.

WORDS TIM RICHARDSON PHOTOGRAPHS RICHARD BLOOM

IN BRIEF

What Ultra-naturalistic ‘non-garden’
Where Portola Valley, California, USA.
Climate Long, arid summers; short, cold and wet winters.
Soil Gravelly and dry.
Hardiness zone USDA 9.

Below: The glass-walled house in Portola Valley, California, is set in grassland, with the garden subtly delimited by fin-like concrete walls, partially obscured by vegetation.
Right: Concrete steps lead down to a guest house that echoes the house’s ‘farm-like’ architectural aesthetic.
Gardens have been becoming less ‘garden-like’ in recent years – at least at the cutting edge of design. What this means in practice is the blurring of the boundaries between garden and landscape, and the use of a palette of plants with a ‘naturalistic’ look and feel, even if in many cases the subjects used are not native to the region.

This trend is generally expressed in terms of plant choice – the idea of ‘plant communities’ – but it is also possible to develop it in the context of the wider landscape. At one extreme, this involves embedding the property in its locale so that at first sight it does not seem to have a garden at all.

This is what San Francisco-based designer Ron Lutsko has achieved at a property in a well-heeled enclave about 30 miles southeast of the city. It may seem like an extreme strategy now, but his approach is likely to become ever more commonplace as private owners seek to avoid the connotations of domesticity.

Portola Valley is a rural area distinguished by gently undulating fields and small copses of native woodland. Its pleasantly understated, semi-agricultural atmosphere belies the fact that this is one of the wealthiest communities in the USA – a lower-key alternative to neighbouring Palo Alto for the tech-industry executives of Silicon Valley.

A new modernist house designed by architect Jonathan Feldman reflects this understated aesthetic, in that it is a single-storey residence of dark-stained, cedar boards and plate glass, hunkered down on the side of a small hill. Ron was commissioned to create a setting for the house that did not interrupt the link with the landscape.

“The big question at a site like this is, ‘Where are the edges?’, Ron begins. “We thought we would draw really clear lines around the garden areas and let the rest do its thing.” Those ‘clear lines’ have been created by a series of low, concrete walls or fins in the hillside by the house that are effectively absorbed into the topography.

“We made a series of slices through the hillside,” Ron explains. “Down by the
Plantings around the terrace include, in the foreground, the native grasses *Stipa pulchra* and *Danthonia californica*. There are small, stunted, valley oaks with mistletoe in the branches and the odd native sycamore, set within knee-high grasses – most of which are not native to California but were originally introduced in the 19th century as a source of pasture feed for horses. The dominant grass is *Avena fatua* (common wild oat), complemented by native coyote brush, *Baccharis pilularis*. Ron is alive to the irony of an apparently natural, timeless scene such as this, in fact defined by ‘invasive’ plants from the Mediterranean. But he is happy to work in this context. The grasses are brown by mid-May, and he says he loves their richly burnished hues in the evening light. By June and July, they are golden-yellow in the sunshine, and in November they go grey. “I completely embrace that look,” the designer concludes.

The domestic garden and terrace down by the house are edged by native plantings introduced by Ron: the small, tufty grass *Stipa pulchra* provides the basic textural note, augmented by a limited palette of Californian natives including *Sisyrinchium* (blue-eyed grass), *Achillea millefolium* and *Penstemon heterophyllus*. The flat garage roof has been planted up – mainly with sedums. “When I do these roofs now, I pretty much only use succulents,” Ron explains, “because I know they will be OK out here. In California it is possible to have no rain for six months.” Existing trees – mostly sycamores and oaks – have been left in situ.

An entrance path lined with spiky *Muhlenbergia* grasses, together with *Phlomis ‘Edward Bowles’*, leads down to a separate guesthouse building, where there are plantings of natives such as native Pacific Coast iris, *Festuca californica* and the pitcher sage, *Salvia spathacea*. The understated simplicity of the plantings here does not jar with a feeling that this place is in tune with the valley setting.
There is currently a vogue in US architecture for modernist houses that riff on the concept of barns and other farm buildings. At most of these properties, the garden style tends towards chic minimalism. Ron Lutsko’s ‘non-garden’ intriguingly complements this look and could well be the start of something different.

USEFUL INFORMATION
Find out more about Ron’s work at lutskoassociates.com

CREATING A ‘NON-GARDEN’

Forget the fence. If possible, delimit the boundaries and let the garden bleed into its surroundings so it appears to be a seamless whole.

Subtle definition. Nearer the house, a garden space can be indicated by means of a change of level, low walls or the use of shrubs to form a putative boundary or ‘edge’.

‘Native’ is not everything. Intensify the plantings near the house, and if necessary beyond, by means of non-native plants as well as native plants.

Forget about flower colour; it’s all about the general tone and feel of the plants.

Allow and encourage colonisation of some areas by native plants – even if they are ‘weeds’ or seem weed-like. They may need managing, but if they thrive, they will appear authentic.