



home & garden

m a g a z i n e

Summerhill showplace
**Home blends traditional
and contemporary styles**

Also inside:
Gardens that give

A Los Altos Town Crier Publication
Spring 2020

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Summerhill
Builder Abbie Bourgan creates a “transitional contemporary” home on Summerhill Avenue in Los Altos.
Page 5

Gardens

Find tips for creating a pollinator garden rich with biodiversity, using California natives and other drought-tolerant plants.

Page 10



List of Advertisers

Alice & Alicia Nuzzo / Sereno Group	Page 2
Artistic Garage Door, Inc.	6
Carmel Stone Imports	15
Cobalt Power Systems, Inc.	3
First Lock & Security Technologies	12
Harrell Remodeling Design Center	7
Huerta’s Tree Service	10
Kramer Radin Law Firm	5
Los Altos Farmer’s Market	14
Lynn North/Compass Real Estate	8
Miramonte Vet Hospital	10
Pazmany Bros. Landscaping	13
Peninsula Building Materials Co.	16
Star One Credit Union	11
Terra Outdoor Living	9
The Forum at Rancho San Antonio	14
The Plumbing Studio	13

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Cover photo: Susan, left, and Abbie Bourgan worked as a team to create the impressive foyer of a house on Summerhill Avenue Abbie built.

Photo by Megan V. Winslow/Town Crier

Summerhill showplace

Los Altos home offers warmed-up take on modern design

By Carolyn Snyder
Special to the Town Crier

Ever fall in love with a house when you walk in the front door?

Home builder Abbie Bourgan aimed to make that happen with his recent project on Summerhill Avenue in Los Altos that he calls a “transitional contemporary” home.

“It’s contemporary but with traditional elements such as a sloped rather than flat roof,” he said. “And the earth-tone colors of the exterior warm it up.”

What distinguishes the facade is the natural quartzite ledger stone from India.



MEGAN V. WINSLOW/TOWN CRIER

A sloped roofline and the warm tones of the stonework soften the modern exterior of this Summerhill Avenue home.

Continued on Page 6

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Continued from Page 5

According to Bourgan, the latest design trend locally has been a move toward modern homes.

“Some of these designs look nice and intriguing on paper or a computer screen but may be impractical for the site or don’t relate to how people use various spaces,” he said. “They may feel harsh, cold or out of scale.”

His goal was to build a house in tune with the neighborhood – something with curb appeal, an impressive foyer and the illusive “perfect floor plan.”

The 4,237-square-foot house boasts high ceilings, a plethora of windows and an open floor plan as well as private spaces, such as a small office nook off the great room. There are five bedrooms (each with its own bath), an office and two garages (totaling 771 square feet), each with electric-vehicle charging stations.

To the left of the foyer is the open living room and formal dining room; to the right, a glass staircase leading to the master suite and two bedrooms; directly ahead, a



MEGAN V. WINSLOW/TOWN CRIER

Built-in cabinetry and shelving are among custom features in the great room.

view through the house to the backyard with its mature oaks.

The living room fireplace is flanked by windows and faced (floor to 12-foot ceiling) with a high-density porcelain material from Spain that has the look of copper. Suspended above the dining room table is a strip of crystal prisms of varied shapes and sizes – one of several unique

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Mark Brand Architecture and Christopher Stark Photography

lighting fixtures selected by Bourgan’s wife, Susan.

“Her influence increases as we approach the finish stages,” Bourgan said. “Although she is not initially involved in the architectural design phase, she certainly has veto power on all aspects of a project and is not shy about exercising it from time to time. You could say she keeps me from getting too creative.”

However, there is no lack of creativity in the house. For example, one of the downstairs bedrooms is pre-wired for a home theater video projector and 5.1 audio system if a home theater is on someone’s wish list.

Innovative touches

Technological innovations also are featured in the kitchen designed by Sherry Scott of Sherry Scott Design in Los Altos.

“This meant not using the same tools and elements which are now 20-plus years old,” Scott said. “For example, stone countertops have pores and need periodic sealing. Today we have sintered particle slab surfaces offering zero porosity, so things like red wine won’t absorb and



MEGAN V. WINSLOW/TOWN CRIER

A French oak hardwood floor and 12-foot ceiling contribute to a light and airy kitchen whose color scheme – soft green and dark earth tones – echoes the outdoors.

leave rings on the countertop.”

The eat-at kitchen island combines man-made quartz and a next-generation countertop material called Dekton in a color called Trilium. It’s produced with approximately

Continued on Page 8



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Continued from Page 7

80% recycled materials and evokes volcanic stones in warm gray, black and rust colors.

“No two slabs are alike – just like fingerprints,” Scott said.

The thermo-structured surfaces on the European-style cabinets and drawers may look and feel like natural wood, but they are harder, don’t fade in a sunlit room and are less susceptible to water damage.

The Miele six-burner gas range has a touch-activated control panel, a griddle, a warming drawer and dual-use ovens that include steam, convection and microwave.

To create a warm and inviting space, Scott looked to nature – dark earthy tones on the island, soft natural green back-painted glass for the backsplashes and light metallic cabinets above the range to reflect the sky.

The kitchen flows into the great room, which features a wall of glass opening to a covered terrace with a fire pit. In addition, there is an outdoor kitchen barbecue. A dry creek bed – Summerhill Creek – bisects the backyard of the half-acre property.



MEGAN V. WINSLOW/TOWN CRIER

The master bath features dual vanities and a freestanding tub, as well as an oversized shower and heated floor.

Different perspective

Bourgan likes the floor plan because it’s functional and “great for indoor and outdoor entertaining,” but what he likes best is the kitchen.

“I do like to cook,” he said.

His tech background has enabled him to bring a

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different perspective to the conventional building approach. Smart Home technology and energy efficiency are important components in the Summerhill house.

Bourgan didn't become a home builder until 15 years ago, when he and Susan and their two young daughters moved to Los Altos. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering from Northwestern University and spent 24 years in high-tech product design, development and management in the Boston area.

"I have always had a soft spot for building and construction," he said. "I bought my first fixer-upper right out of school when I was 22 years old. It was much easier to buy a home back then."

He and Susan even built their own 5,000-square-foot Energy Star Certified home in a Boston suburb.

When he decided to make a career change, real estate development was a natural fit, and Los Altos had greater appeal than Boston because of the weather and housing market.

One of his biggest fans is realtor emeritus Abby Ahrens of the Abigail Company of Los Altos, who has helped in marketing, sales and finding high-potential properties.

"He has a lot of common sense and instinctively knows what people may want if they were building the home themselves," she said of Bourgan. 🌻



MEGAN V. WINSLOW/TOWN CRIER

The powder room's vanity is "floated" on the wall to create the illusion of a larger space.

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Gardens that give

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NATIVE PLANTS

By Tanya Kucak

Claude Monet famously said, "I must have flowers, always, always."

I think of that quote whenever I see a garden designed or inspired by Kate Frey. She designs lush gardens bursting with a multitude of flowering plants and humming with life, using California natives and other drought-tolerant plants. In a presentation at the National Heirloom Expo,

Continued on Page 12



TANYA KUCAK/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

A front yard of lacy phacelia, California poppies and other wildflowers is a magnet for pollinators.

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Continued from Page 10

she discussed “Pollinator Gardens: Gardens That Give.”

Frey designed and managed the organic public garden at Fetzner Vineyards for 18 years, and in 2005 and 2007 she created gardens focusing on sustainability and biodiversity for the famed Chelsea Flower Show in London. Both gardens won gold medals. They featured California wildflowers as well as legumes and clovers.

“Gardens can be positive spaces for biodiversity,” she said, noting that the ecological services provided by pollinators offer benefits to people as well as to the ecosystem. “Vegetable gardens need flowers for beneficial insects and for pollinators.”

At the Lotusland public garden in Southern California, “pollinator plants are placed around other collections to keep the gardens healthy,” Frey said.

With gardens, people can “foster life for each other as well as for the world,” she said. When Frey converted her mother’s front lawn to a “flower field,” passersby loved it. Her mom would “sit on the porch and engage with them,” and it became a “vehicle of community” for her, Frey said.

Rules for success

Frey offered the following rules for success.

- “Abundance, not minimalism” is one of Frey’s guid-



TANYA KUCAK/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

A small to medium flowering shrub, like this native currant, attracts a multitude of pollinators and beneficial insects. One shrub can easily satisfy the 3-foot-by-3-foot minimum patch size recommended for pollinators.

ing principles.

“Cram (the plants) in and maximize the planting area,” she said.

- Plan for 12 months of bloom. Some bees are active



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GARDENS

as early as January or February. “Manzanitas are extremely important,” Frey said, recommending willow trees and other early bloomers as well.

• Choose plants that offer a diversity of floral resources, she recommended. Flowers can provide nectar, pollen, or both.

“Double flowers are inaccessible to bees,” she said. Double flowers have extra petals that replace or reduce the pollen- and nectar-producing organs. Other plants that do not attract bees include ferns, grapes, grains and conifers.

• Plant patches of the same species at least 3-feet-by-3-feet.

“Honeybees practice floral constancy: They visit the same plant all day long,” Frey said.

Massing plants enables bees to forage more efficiently.

• Native plants are best, according to Frey. “Honeybees go crazy for vinegar weed,” she added, a summer annual that needs no irrigation.

Hayfield tarweed is another one of her favorite summer annuals for bees.

“We don’t value our native plants as much as we should,” Frey said.

For instance, she noted, lacy phacelia is a 3-foot

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GARDENS

Continued from Page 13

California native annual used around the world as “bee fodder” in orchards, but “not as much used in the United States.”

- Use perennials, shrubs and trees as well as annuals. One study found three times as many beneficial insects in hedgerows versus weedy field edges, and twice the diversity (number of different species). Frey singled out coyote brush as “great bee fodder” and noted it also attracts pest-eating beneficials such as predatory flies and parasitic wasps.

- Improve your soil with cover crops, and use compost to feed your plants.

“Diversity is the key in cover crops,” Frey said, to support a diversity of soil microorganisms.

She likes to plant daikon radish to break through hard soil, clovers to add nitrogen, and California poppies for pollen.

- Use woody mulch for paths.

“Landscape fabric allows no nutrient cycling by worms and no nesting by native ground-dwelling bees,” Frey said.

Worms move through the soil, digesting organic matter and leaving rich worm castings to fertilize plants.

Tanya Kucak gardens organically. Email her at tanyagarden@gmail.com. 

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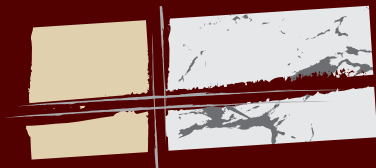
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