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At home with Jade Jagger



# **Silvina & Eric Blasen**

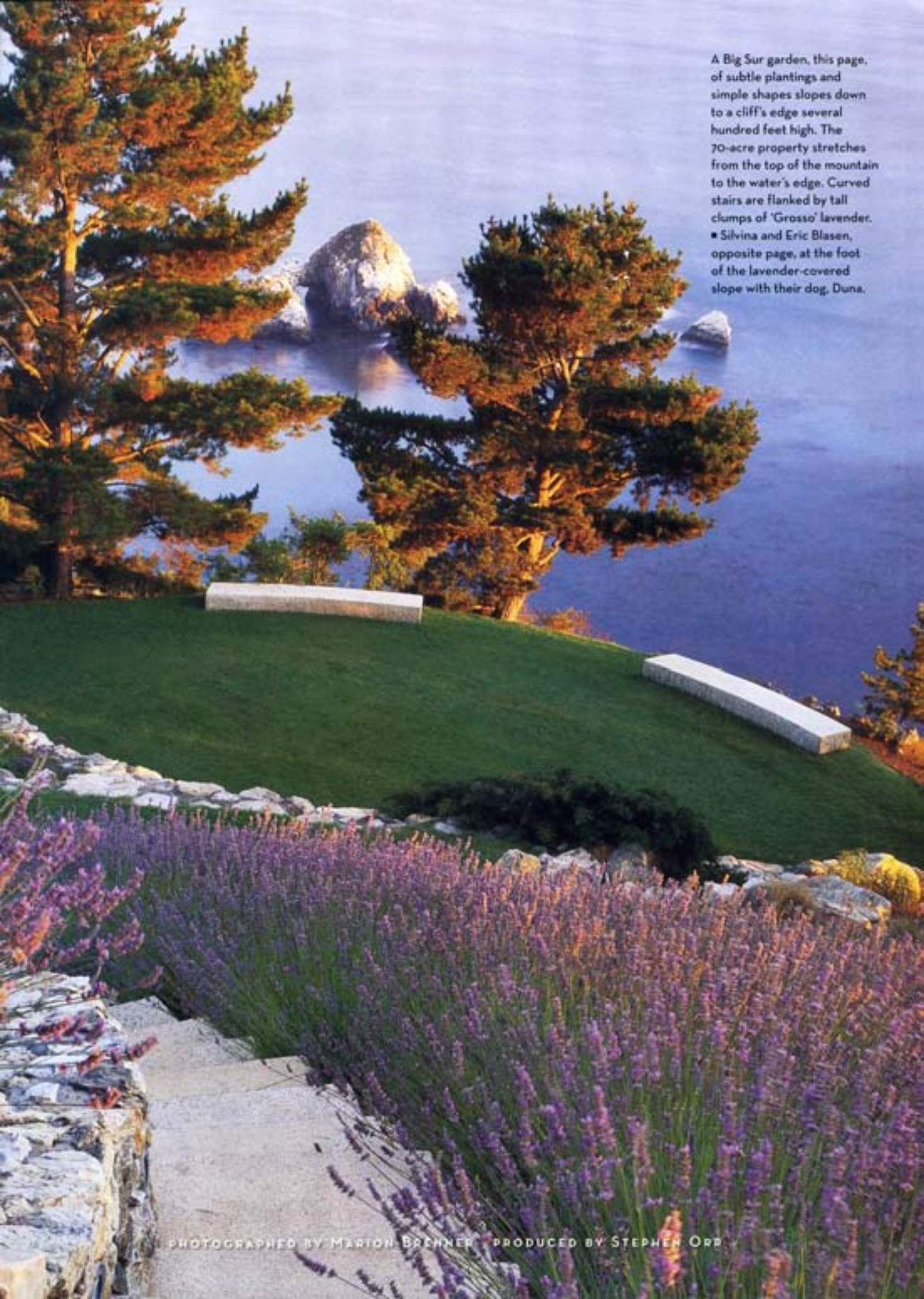
## THE NATURALISTS



A STEEP PROPERTY IN BIG SUR PROVIDES  
A PAIR OF BAY AREA LANDSCAPE  
DESIGNERS A DRAMATIC PLACE TO  
MARRY THEIR INTERESTS IN PLANTS  
AND SUSTAINABLE HORTICULTURE





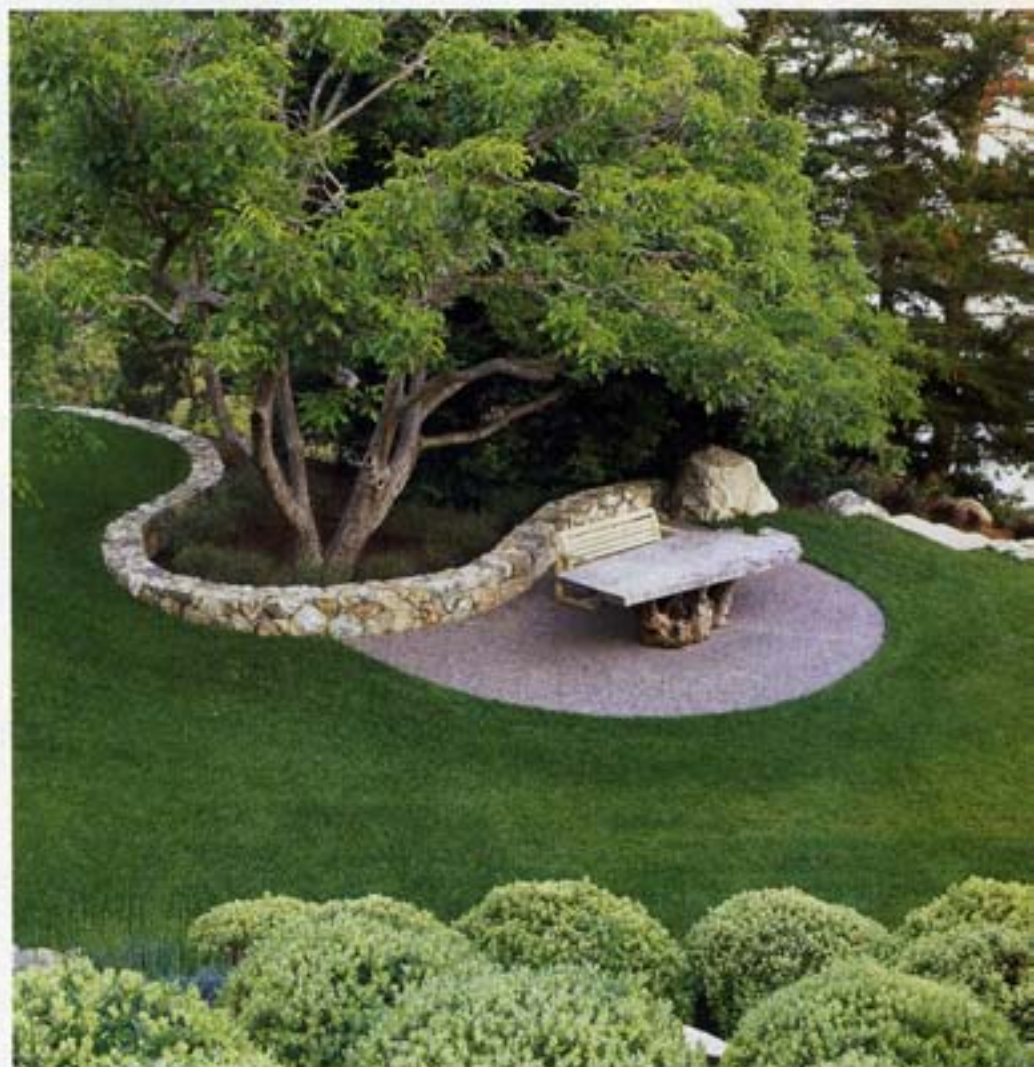


A Big Sur garden, this page, of subtle plantings and simple shapes slopes down to a cliff's edge several hundred feet high. The 70-acre property stretches from the top of the mountain to the water's edge. Curved stairs are flanked by tall clumps of 'Grosso' lavender. ■ Silvina and Eric Blasen, opposite page, at the foot of the lavender-covered slope with their dog, Duna.









**P**erhaps the most powerful California garden designer is the state itself. Nowhere else in this country do the forces of geology, geography, weather, and expanding population come together to create such dynamic conditions. The best California designers know how to harness, or at least observe, these powerful forces, and in the process they have developed a unique visual vocabulary. Eric and Silvina Blasen understand the state well, even though they are transplants. He is from Portland, Oregon, and she is from Buenos Aires. Setting up a Bay Area landscape architecture practice meant that they had to learn to read the California climate. "We are the opposite of much of

the country," Eric says. "Here the natural cycle is green in the winter and semi-dormant in the summer." But even that pattern can be unpredictable. "When the rains arrive, they don't settle in for months like they do in the Pacific Northwest," he says. "They come suddenly and in a big way." Anyone who has studied the intricate zone map in Sunset's *Western Garden Book* knows that Eric's undergraduate degree in geography must come in handy. Silvina is the "plant advocate" of the pair. She selects varieties that create habitats and give support to the plants around them. Of course, Mediterranean species flourish, but a range of plants can be used if attention is paid to the region's specialized microclimates.

The Blasen consider the culture of California almost as significant for their work as the climate. "I think people are more experimental here," Eric says. "Our clients aren't so

**The Blasen collaborated with stonemason Edwin Hamilton to create a series of walls and stairs, opposite page, that define the spaces. Each terrace is planted with either flowers or lawn. The stone for the walls—large boulders interspersed with smaller rocks—was collected at the site and serves to relate the garden to its rugged seaside surroundings. ■ A low curving wall, this page, defines the dining space near the house. The burlled wood table and bench are positioned for appreciating the sunsets and views of the Pacific.**





tied to the past." This openness allows the designers to be more daring, but they also find a sense of social responsibility. "Most clients want their gardens to be responsive to the environment," Silvina explains. They are concerned about the source of their water and its runoff; they also want to know if the hardscape is local and renewable.

One of the Blasens' largest projects is a 70-acre property in Big Sur that stretches from the mountains to the sea. They knew at once that the sustainability of the dramatic site would be crucial. The existing garden consisted of a sloping lawn that ended at a sea cliff. The designers created terraces of massive walls interspersed with a winding lawn. The turf grass might at first seem an unsustainable choice, but, as Silvina explains, "we only use water when it is already there," and the site turned out to have its own aquifer. The terraces are planted with a drought-tolerant grass mix that serves as an absorption barrier as the water makes its way to the sea. Only a small amount of seaweed- and fish-based fertilizer is used because of concerns about runoff into the ocean.

"This garden is about movement," Silvina says. "The ocean is full of motion, and the sea birds are flying." The lessons the Blasens learned while working on this challenging site are sure to inform much of their future work. Civic projects and a new garden in Marfa, Texas, will round out their experience. "We want to marry the site, the architecture, and the client's vision," Eric says. "That's what sustainable means to us." [blasengardens.com] — S.O.

The plants were chosen for their hardiness in marine conditions and for drought tolerance. They include both Mediterranean and native species: opposite page, California lilac (*Ceanothus* 'Dark Star'), 'Otto Quast' Spanish lavender, statice, and 'Hopleys' ornamental oregano, in tones of purple, mauve, dark red, and blue. • Stone steps, this page, lead from one lawn to the next, past ornamental grasses like purple fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum'). Carved stone benches sit at the cliff's edge overlooking the ocean.





