







# visions of tuscany

A Mosaic of All Things Mediterranean, Inside and Out

By Susan Heeger      Photographed by Steven A. Gunther

**The house was crumbling**, the lawn clotted with weeds, but when Marsha Brander stepped onto this Brentwood acre, she was home. After 30 high-powered years in the garment business, she wanted the garden she'd never had time for, stuffed with roses, dripping with vines and furnished for year-round dining and lounging. So in 1992, she and her husband, Marty, owners of Democracy, a women's clothing company, bought the property and settled in to its guest cottage while they built a new house and started planting. By the time they finished their Tuscan-style villa, they had a Tuscan-style garden, complete with olive trees, acanthus, chianti grapes and wisteria.

"For two years before the house was done, we ate outside every night. The garden was our solace. And it definitely influenced our building plans," says Marsha Brander, who worked on the outdoors with L.A. interior decorator Tom Beeton and Winnetka landscape designer Eric Solberg.

The new garden grew up around the old one, which had been long-neglected yet featured elegant tree ferns and camellias and a cloud of 'Barbara Karst' bougainvillea. These existing plants gave the landscape a mature look, and the old brick terrace and swimming pool helped organize the garden into rooms. Solberg extended the brick to create more outdoor living spaces and framed them in box hedges to add a formal note. Within the hedged compartments are blowzy white roses, set in a froth of Santa Barbara daisies that Solberg twined up the rose stems to give them height. Next, he restored the rear lawn to its former glory and stitched a ruffle of mixed greens along its edge. In addition to a pair of existing figs, new westringia, helichrysum, lavender, pittosporums and weeping mulberries now sweeten the walk toward the back of the lot, which drops off into an olive grove and then a eucalyptus wood.

For his part, Beeton introduced architectural elements, such as cast-stone columns, to heighten the Old World ambience and link the feel of the garden with the spirit of the house. He also tracked down outdoor furniture—including a pair of curved benches from Scavenger's Paradise in Studio City—so that the Branders and their son, Eric, 21, could relax alfresco.

Then there was a project that Solberg and Brander undertook together, the transformation of a run-down garden shack, formerly used as a painting studio, into an atmospheric potting shed. Fitted with skylights and tucked among the

An old shack has been remodeled into a potting shed-cum-garden retreat with skylights. Here, the owners can work or relax at a vintage French table and chairs surrounded by ivy, privet and dwarf eugenia and myrtle in stone and terra-cotta pots.





eucalyptus, it's always a bright, cool place to tend plants or retreat from the mid-day sun. "Eric and I were like one person in our collaboration," Brander recalls. "That's how much he knew my taste."

A lover of all things Mediterranean, she was delighted when, after the olive trees suffered from too much lawn irrigation, Solberg exchanged the grass beneath them for prostrate rosemary. She also approved his use of wine barrels for container gardening—a staple of the Tuscan landscape—and his introduction of silver lace vine, the same vine that crawls up the walls of the Acropolis.

"The joy of this garden still surprises me," Brander says. "For 30 years, I scarcely noticed the outdoors. Now I live my life in it." ■

**The raised brick terrace in the middle of the garden is furnished with a cast-stone pedestal table and wood chairs for dining beneath grape vines and a pittosporum. Columns suggest ancient ruins. Left: 'Barbara Karst' bougainvillea and 'Iceberg' roses bloom in profusion adjacent to the outdoor fireplace.**