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### Living in Armonia

## Local couple find harmony in Tuscan-inspired landscape

By LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT  
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*Editor's note: Master Gardens of Santa Barbara County is a new monthly feature that explores the gardens of UC Master Gardeners.*

When Dennis and Suzanne Elledge purchased a parcel of mountainous terrain on the back of the Riviera in 1997, they were in an Italian state of mind. The couple hoped to recreate the distinctive style of the Tuscan countryside they loved while striving to maintain a harmonious connection to the flora and fauna of the Santa Ynez Mountains. Ms. Elledge christened the property Armonia (Italian for "harmony"), and together they set about creating their Mediterranean dream house.

It took four long years of planning, surveys, brush clearing, excavation and construction before they were finally able to occupy the spacious stucco and tile masterpiece. Although forced to remove a good-sized chunk of the hillside to build on the steep, rocky slope, they were determined not to disturb the rest of their acreage when it came to landscaping out of respect for the local ecosystem that has been flourishing in this spot for millennia.

While a large portion of their property remains intentionally wild and unfenced, the 10,000-square-foot area adjoining their home presents major challenges requiring copious amounts of imagination, skill, energy and commitment - all of which the Elledges possess in abundance. What they often lack is enough time to take care of the myriad outdoor tasks that demand their attention.

Mr. Elledge, 64, is a former residential and commercial builder who, after retiring, went back to grad school and now teaches elementary school, while Ms. Elledge, 60,

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Welcome to Armonia. A taste of Italy in the heart of Santa Barbara.

SUZANNE ELLEDGE PHOTO

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stays busy running her land use planning firm. The key to their winning time-management strategy is "divide and conquer." He takes care of construction projects, edibles, composting and bees, while she's in charge of garden design, plant acquisition, ornamentals and chickens.

Mr. Elledge's first step was to do something about huge clods of rock-hard clay. "I was an archaeology major in college, so digging is my thing!" he tells the News-Press.

That was fortunate because he ended up having to dig out 18 inches of native soil and hauling in truckloads of manure and other organic amendments to be able to plant anything, and somewhere along the way, he became an expert composter. Although with ample space, he "cooks" his compost in long windrows instead of in a box or a pile, but his formula for success is easily applied to smaller quantities.

"The crucial ratio is 30 percent green and 70 percent brown. You have to pay attention to it and turn it frequently to keep it aerobic. It works - my dirt grows anything!" Mr. Elledge says.

It took the couple many years of trial-and-error gardening before they decided to embark on another joint venture in 2015 by becoming UC Master Gardeners.

"By that time, we were looking at our third backyard redo," Ms. Elledge recalls, "and we knew we needed help. I've loved gardening since I was a child, but until I took the Master Gardener training classes, I never realized how much I didn't know! I wanted to learn more about natives and other drought-tolerant plants; my roses were failing, and Dennis and I were both getting tired of making so many expensive mistakes."

Their Master Gardener training helped them understand that gardening is a collaboration between art and science, and horticultural magic happens when both components are working together in harmony.

Case in point: the Elledge backyard, with its towering spires of Italian cypress positioned squarely in the center of the space, offering a vivid taste of Tuscany. A stone obelisk fountain sports a fleet of floating wine corks that serve as landing pads for bees and butterflies, and nearby a handsome turkey fig is loaded with ripening fruit. Over the patio, a wooden trellis holds the twisted vines of purple wisteria, providing cool shade in the summer while allowing the sun to peek through in winter. A small patch of bright green grass is the only exception to their rule of low-impact landscaping. "But keep in mind, it's only 150 square feet," Mr. Elledge says, "and I need someplace to kick the soccer ball with my grandsons!"

Ms. Elledge's keen designer's eye is evident in the numerous flower beds artfully situated around the yard so that they can be enjoyed from both inside and out. Striking combinations of color, texture and form seem at once carefully planned and



Wisteria crawling over a wooden arbor shades both patio and living room.

The back slope features low-maintenance lavender, agave and olive trees.

Floating corks in the obelisk fountain provide landing spots for bees and butterflies.

LINDA S. BAITY PHOTOS



form seem at once carefully planned and charmingly naturalistic. Mounds of purple heart and green agave attenuata stand out boldly against the rich golden ochre of the stucco siding. Silvery dymondia and dusty miller are paired with coral heuchera, orange lion's tail, and pink and yellow 'jelly bean' mimulus, interspersed by rounded tufts of blue fescue and waves of low-growing salvia.

Ms. Elledge's fondness for succulents is evident, and her decision to display them as single large specimens in ceramic containers of varying colors and heights only enhances their dramatic sculptural beauty.

"They're much easier to maintain than smaller groupings of different varieties. I've tried putting lots of smaller succulents together but they grow in at different rates and always tend to look straggly. The bigger ones grow slowly, so they look great all the time without constant help from me."

Among dozens of backyard fruit trees is a prized apricot that delivered a bumper crop for the first time this season. In years past, the blossoms had been blown off the branches before they could set fruit, but early last spring, Mr. Elledge cleverly rigged up a wind blind to protect the tree. Much to his delight, the idea worked like a charm and he harvested enough apricots this year to make a huge batch of preserves, with enough fruit left over to share with the squirrels.

And speaking of squirrels, no four-legged residents of Sycamore Canyon need fear for their furry little lives while visiting Armonia due to the Elledges' firm no-kill policy that extends to even the lowliest creatures.

"These animals have been here forever," Mr. Elledge explains. "Bobcats, coyotes, deer, skunks, even the rats and snakes. They all belong to this land. We're the intruders, so it's up to us to figure out how to peacefully co-exist. Also keep in mind that we don't have any neighbors, and we don't have any rattlesnakes!"

Mr. Elledge's pest management strategy is to exclude and/or repel without resorting to the use of deadly force. For example, he installed vinyl-coated wire fencing that extends a full 2 feet underground around the entire perimeter of the backyard, which keeps out the gophers. He wrapped wide metal bands around the trunks of his beloved fruit trees to keep out the rats, and even deer, which are pervasive in the mountains, don't pose much of a problem.

"There's so much food out here for them to choose from, they seem to content to stay outside our fence."

As for other critters like chipmunks and squirrels, "Sure, they're always around, but we really don't mind sharing."

Another Dennis Elledge original is the elegant furniture-grade wooden planter he constructed and planted with a tempting array of herbs and salad greens. Four tomatoes recently transplanted into the



Drought-resistant favorites in beds and pots edge the kid-sized lawn.

A furniture-grade custom planter holds herbs and greens.

LINDA S. BAITY PHOTOS

Dennis Elledge is justifiably proud of his bumper crop of apricots.

SUZANNE ELLEDGE PHOTO

tomatoes recently transplanted into the ground from containers grow in custom-built wooden tomato cages positioned against the stone retaining wall, and the raised bed nearby is producing gigantic cucumbers, peppers and squash.

In yet another nod to the iconic Mediterranean plant palette, the broad back slope behind the garden showcases three large olive trees and more than 100 lavender bushes, accented with a symmetrical arrangement of giant octopus agaves. The design is simple, sophisticated and visually striking, with the practical bonus of requiring little in terms of maintenance or water.

Future plans include adding an orchard of almond and walnut trees, as well as Fuyu persimmon, in a fenced-off area formerly occupied by an old chicken coop. Also on the drawing board is installing a water bladder in the understory of the home to collect and store rainwater out of sight rather than in exterior tanks, which is one advantage of living on the side of a steep hill.

The Elledges live in an idyllic setting, but they also have great instincts, loads of creativity, and a solid base of knowledge to draw upon as their partnership in the garden and in life grows stronger each season. Armonia is their home, but it's also how they think and have chosen to live their lives, setting a standard for environmental stewardship worthy of our respect and our gratitude. Bravissimo!

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Suzanne and Dennis Elledge

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