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GARDEN PROFILE:

Northern California: A Rugged Aesthetic

California. Drought; water restrictions; fire warnings. I was expecting harsh barren landscapes and deeply distressed people. Instead, what I found were a mix of drought tolerant plants, strategic watering practices, and a design approach that I call "rugged aesthetic". Lush roses soften the edges of spikey agaves, sturdy sedums crawl around the base of fragrant lavender, ornamental grasses cloak banks and pond edges. The plant called "corpse flower" (*Amorphophallus titanum*) due to a putrid aroma resembling rotting flesh was on full display at Berkeley Botanical Garden. People I interviewed at commercial gardens were surprisingly generous-both in their praise of the hired gardeners who maintained the ornamental landscapes and by their comments indicating they were honored and pleased when customers picked and sampled plants from their gardens.

I travelled to northern California this summer to present techniques for teaching critical thinking to experiential learners in the college classroom at the 35th Annual Critical Thinking Conference. After the conference I toured public gardens, commercial vineyards, and viewed urban landscapes. The hills were brown, but the stunning native live oaks (*Quercus agrifolia*) were thriving. The most commonly used plants that I recognized included lavender (*Lavandula*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus*), and agapanthus. An assortment of roses and ornamental grasses thrived in this dry climate as well. Drip irrigation lines were visible in both mulched and unmulched beds.

The Community Garden at Berkeley Marina was the first designed landscape that caught my eye. Interior style chairs were placed outdoors next to a wooden table and an outdoor well-used grill. Mixes of edible herbs, succulents, perennials, and vegetables filled the planting beds within the large decorative wood fence. Statuary and art added visual excitement as well. Outside the fence another bed ran along the edge of the garden that was always accessible to the public-holding more lavender and other perennials. I met the garden creator and a co-worker during one visit to the space and they both encouraged me to sample or pick any plants I might wish to. This "share in the products" approach appeared at most of the gardens I visited.



Urban parking lots and street spaces also radiate with plantings and ornamental design. Downtown Napa has an area called Oxbow Market where espaliered trees and flowering perennials greet consumers on the sidewalk or street. A flower stall on Shattick Street in downtown Berkeley creates street side plant pleasure while cut flowers crowd vases in most every restaurant and retail shop.

The botanical gardens are packed full of drought tolerant plants and Berkeley Botanic Garden posts a large educational sign promoting Waterwise Gardening. San Francisco Botanical Garden outdid itself with the Asian garden-there was a sculpture of a Buddha-like face embedded in water lily clusters and the conifer collection surrounding the water was thick and rich, chock full of evergreen hues and texture.





The architecture and plantings at vibrant vineyards were most striking. At VML Vineyard in the Russian River Valley the art of “crevicing” was on full display. Designer Gary Ratway created a 2” planting bed at the back of each stair step and fragrant herbs or sturdy succulents were installed. The result made the stairs themselves a destination. Flowering artichoke’s striking purple inflorescence was a star performer in the planting beds at VML. At Artesa, a vineyard in the Carneros region, the architecture digs deep into the earth to blend with the mountains and sky. This earth construction creates usable work and customer space in the hillside while open air balconies allow daylight to flood the large common areas inside. Barcelona architect Domingo Triay was the artist behind the modern streamlined look that seeks to blend the natural and built environments. The hills are covered in native grasses while formal water features and modern sculptures add texture, sound, and movement to the experience. Italian cypress trees (*Cupressus sempervirens*) act like royalty on the grounds with their vertical statement.

pergola to enter. If you have to wait to be seated (reservations really are needed-even at lunchtime) there is a desirable outdoor Japanese style terrace also draped in vines. A huge vase of white roses and dangling ivy greeted customers at the base of the entry stairs on the day of my visit. The French Laundry, an award winning restaurant located in Yountville, runs an impressive production style culinary garden

located right across the street from the restaurant. A garden map identifies the collection of well-tended vegetable, herb, and flower plants that anyone can walk through. Bees are housed off to one end, and a greenhouse is located in the back. Backyard, an outdoor café in Forestville, placed small clay pots of sedum on every table. I couldn’t help but share my glass of water with my plant.



Hotels and restaurants featured plants in entrances, parking lots, and even in the name, such as The Rose Garden Inn located in downtown Berkeley. Chez Panisse, the iconic local food restaurant owned by Alice Waters allows patrons to walk through a vine covered

