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Home & Garden

Picking fences

Mark your property's perimeter with an elegant entranceway

BY DIANA L. POWERS

Does your home lack a certain "curb appeal?" If so, you might consider adding an attractive entry gate to give it some requisite charm this spring. Sebastopol's Charles Prowell, 46, has been designing and building commissioned dining room tables and writing desks, as well as residential interiors and built-ins for Marin residents for 24 years. In addition, however, he creates and installs exquisite garden and entry gates and fences in both Marin and Sonoma.

"I love to do fences. After months and months in the shop, I am dying to get out in the sun and take my shirt off...I even love to dig the post holes," he says. A third-generation woodworker from Sydney, Ill., Prowell moved to Marin in 1973. He describes the move as being prompted by his interest "in a level of workmanship that seemed beyond the scope of a midwestern clientele."

His work as a gate builder began in 1982 as an outgrowth of his fine furniture-building reputation: He landed a commission for a garden gate with an accompanying arbor to be built on a Larkspur public lot. Prowell marks this date as his "departure from the typical, nailed-together, batten-style gates common to most yards with fences." His client wanted something a little more elegant (and was willing to pay for it) so he took the opportunity to make a gate with real rails and stiles, just as he would if he were constructing a traditional door for a house.

Having built many gates since then, Prowell is always experimenting with new ways to blend aesthetics and efficiency. One of his old standbys is a Craftsman-

style rail-and-stile gate that goes well with the arbors and trellises that detail many older homes here in Northern California.

Prowell considers both redwood and red cedar excellent choices for gates and uses them frequently. Lately, because it costs less, he has been using more red cedar. If saving money is of interest, he recommends checking out the lesser grades where there are often mostly clear pieces with a few knots that can be worked around.

Prowell is insistent on painting or staining all of his gates, regardless of the wood species. A good quality of paint or stain will protect the exposed end grain of the wood and help keep the moisture out of the

nooks and crannies. There are any number of oil-based and water-based products available that promise to enrich the natural color of wood, but he contends that nothing short of pigment will maintain the color of the wood and prevent graying. Because it is highly absorptive, cedar is good at taking on oil-based, exterior-grade stains.

Giving the gate only one coat of stain, Prowell can be assured his gate has the coloring of first-growth Honduras mahogany. Because this stain also acts as a sealer, a second coat would not penetrate evenly and would leave a gummy residue. Here on the West Coast, he recommends a gate be stained about every five years.

Some of Prowell's clients prefer their gates painted. If so, he maintains it's important to seal a cedar gate with an oil-based primer. The extractives in cedar, as well as redwood, will bleed through a latex

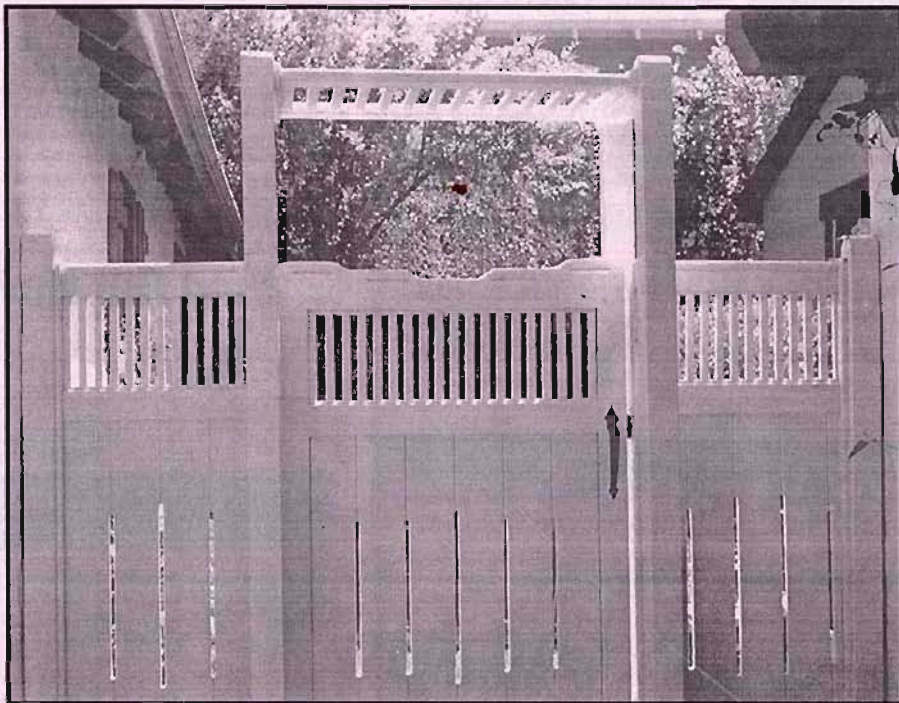
paint. In addition, redwood has to be dry to be painted, otherwise it will bleed through even oil-based primers.

Prowell learned the art of woodworking from his father and grandfather. Both were followers of turn-of-the-century woodworker-architect Gustav Stickley's utilitarian, almost Shakerlike style, championed by the American craftsman movement. "My grandfather was a cabinetmaker, and my father a carpenter, so most of my designs spring from the handcrafted techniques of the cabinetmaker pitted against the practicalities of the carpenter," says Prowell.

"Simplicity has always been the common denominator—simplicity and balance," he adds. "Regardless of the complicated 'tenonry' or exposed joints with fitted wedges, the piece should work on first glance; its separated parts should never upstage the whole.

"The refinements, adornments, the technical wizardry," says Prowell, "are all there as the supporting cast, meant to blend together on this crucial first look like the secondary strokes of a painting or the prose of a novel. They're to be appreciated, even perused and scrutinized, but only as an afterthought, for the sum of the most extravagant details can never carry a piece, can never right an imbalanced design."

Charles Prowell Woodworks can be reached at 707/823-8013 and 707/823-8652; e-mail him at CProwell@aol.com. His Web site with photos of sample gates can be accessed via www.prowell.com/mercelwoodworks.



The artistic craftsmanship of Charles Prowell's garden gates and fences are a careful balance between efficacy and aesthetics.

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