

HOME & GARDEN



MICHAEL MACOR / The Chronicle

John Sissom, 12, of Berkeley checks out the flowers, insects and lizards on the metal gate at Peralta Community Garden. The gate was designed by Amy Blackstone.

Grand entrance



MICHAEL MACOR / The Chronicle

Stalks of bamboo on a verdigris bronze gate complement the Asian theme of a garden in El Cerrito.

A gate demarcates the entry — and sets the tone — for the garden beyond

By Liz Harris
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Like a carefully chosen picture frame, a gate can enhance a beautiful garden. It can blend quietly into the landscape or stand out distinctively, grandly throw out the welcome mat or firmly announce that privacy is of utmost concern.

A gate can set the tone before one ever sets foot in the garden itself. "Whimsical," for example, is how gate designer Amy Blackstone describes her one-of-a-kind fixtures.

The Noe Valley resident takes a highly creative approach. "I love gardens," says the pixie-size welder. "To me, especially in an urban setting, a garden is kind of magical, and the gateway is kind of a trumpet announcement."

Her rustic metal gateway at the Peralta Community Garden in Berkeley is a profusion of sunflowers reaching for the sky. That gate, which is topped by an arch of leaves and flanked by rambling stalks of garden flowers on either side, was Blackstone's first, and an ambitious one at that. Its completion in the mid-'90s led to commissions in the East Bay, San Francisco and beyond for Blackstone, a former community college creative writing instructor who took a welding class years ago and "fell in love with



PENNI GLADSTONE / The Chronicle

A rusty lizard crawls amid metal flowers and leaves on the Peralta Community Garden gate.

metal and fire."

One of those commissions was for Jennifer and Dante Lombardi. After purchasing their Berkeley Hills home four years ago, the couple quickly realized they needed a fence to keep their small children from wandering into the street. Once the wood fence was built, they hired Blackstone to create a most unusual entrance.

They wanted a gate that reflected "all the critters" they entertained in their new home, says Jennifer Lombardi. Raccoons, possums, rats, snakes, spiders, birds, banana slugs and their (now dearly departed) cat, Dante Lombardi, a creative type at an advertising agency, met extensively with Blackstone to go over the design and mechanical details of the two-sided swinging gate. Blackstone created the animals out of metal and welded them together with openings throughout the gate for sunlight to shine through.

Once installed, it was allowed to weather naturally, and when the metal turned a rusty brown that blended with the cedar fence and red-brick patio in front of their wood-frame home, Dante Lombardi sealed it per Blackstone's instructions.

The endearing front gate opened another door for the homeowners, who added plantings to the

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Gate sets the tone for the garden beyond

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now-enclosed patio. "It created a new, outdoor usable space, for sure," says Jennifer Lombardi. Describing the "awesome" gate as garden art, she said it "breeds conversations" among those who see it, and has delighted her three children, who enjoy identifying all the animals it holds.

Plus, "when the sun shines through it, the animals are reflected down on the bricks," adding yet another pleasing dimension.

While the Lombardi gate exudes personality, the average garden gate is far simpler, of course. Yet something as slight as a gentle curve can provide "a playful departure" from the straight, geometric lines — think doors, windows, roofs, walls — that dominate most homes, notes North Bay woodworker Charles Prowell.

"People love that arched top rail," says Prowell, who shows 15 basic styles on his Web site, through which he does most of his marketing. "A gate does not have the rigidity of a front door — a gate, you walk out of there, and you get involved in the frivolity of the garden."

Charles Prowell Woodworks — an extensive line of gates, fences and some furnishings — end up all over the country, from Prowell's Sebastopol backyard to the East Coast. In August, for example, he was enthusiastically undertaking a 5-foot-wide by 7½-foot tall gate for a large, antebellum-style "secret garden" in Charlotte, N.C.

Whether collaborating with clients on the Atlantic or Pacific coasts, Prowell commonly uses digital images of residences and their surrounding landscape to come up with an appropriate design.

"The idea is, everything is more or less related," he says. Issues such as a gate's distance from the house, the strength of the landscaping and architecture of the home all come into play.

"It's a balance that you're after," Prowell says. He works directly with homeowners, who ordinarily select from one of his preset styles, perhaps with a variation or two, and he works with landscape architects and designers.

Everything in context

Though many full-scale landscape contractors use in-house workers to build fences and gates, sometimes a project will cry out for a higher level of expertise.

"Some are much more complicated than others," explains Gary Lazar, owner of Lazar Landscape in Oakland. Citing a recently completed project for a Maybeck home in Berkeley, Lazar says to replicate some of its distinct architectural features, he had a local specialty woodworker craft a detailed hardwood front gate.

On the other hand, he says, a Mediterranean-style house with metalwork might be the launch-point for a metal gate and railing, while a wooden entry with arbor (so often trellised with flowers and



ERIC LUSE / The Chronicle

A tin drum from Haiti with carvings of birds in flight inspired Dave Washer's design for this stone-pillared wood gate in San Anselmo.



PENNI GLADSTONE / The Chronicle

Metal animals animate the garden gate, left and above, that Amy Blackstone designed for Dante and Jennifer Lombardi. At left, the Lombardi children (from left) John, 5, Leo, 2, and Sam, 7, play with their father behind the gate whose figures reflect the "critters" the Lombardis found living near their Berkeley home.

vines), might best suit another residence.

"You want everything to be in context," says Lazar, whose firm provides full-scale service, from design to construction to landscape maintenance. Typically, the garden gate is "one of many different elements" that must fit together, he says. But, as illustrated by the Maybeck home, or the longtime client who purchased a custom-made gate that "we're designing into the garden," sometimes the gate takes center stage.

That's no surprise to Dave Washer of San Anselmo, who is carving his niche as a "hardscape" contractor in Marin. He and his Art Gardens crew build wooden gates and fences, rock and stucco walls,

among other things, laying the groundwork for attractive garden settings.

Washer believes that a gate "is the kind of detail that can make something exceptional, rather than an ordinary wall." If a wall or fence is pre-existing, he will photograph it and come up with a design using PhotoShop, which he then will share with clients so they can visualize the addition. Washer, who enjoys building art installations and has a background in clothing design and art direction, also has an eye for graphics.

He firmly believes that a garden gate should have a peekaboo quality. "You want to be able to see through it, to be able to backlight it with the light of the garden."

He also likes adding a personal touch — not his, but the homeowner's. He has discovered that someone's collectible treasure may be just the thing to personalize or brighten up a gate. One client had a circular Haitian piece with beautifully carved birds — "We designed the whole thing around that tin drum," Washer says.

Personalized designs

That gate spawned others; sometimes Washer will have metalwork specially made as an insert. Another client had an old heating grate from a Victorian home, which sufficed as a distinguishing feature. "It's a personal touch that I wanted to be connected back to the person's home," he says.

Like Prowell, Washer finds that most clients warm to curves. He estimates that 90 percent of his gates have a rounded top. "It gives a sort of softness that is nice — there's a lot of linear edges to a door."

That's also why the cutout inserts are so popular, he believes.

His gates, primarily of clear-sealed or stained redwood, sell for anywhere from \$400 to \$1,200, depending on the carpentry involved.

Prowell, whose gates start at over \$1,100, prefers clear Western cedar. He abandoned redwood about five years ago, mostly due to environmental concerns.

Resources

- Amy Blackstone**, San Francisco. (415) 824-9608.
- Art Gardens**, San Anselmo. (415) 519-0201; www.artgardens.net.
- Charles Prowell Woodworks**, Sebastopol. (800) 906-6651; www.prowellwoodworks.com.
- Lazar Landscape**, Oakland. (510) 444-5195; www.lazarlandscape.com.
- Smith & Hawken**, Berkeley, Mill Valley, Palo Alto, San Francisco, Walnut Creek. (800) 940-1170; www.smithandhawken.com.

ommends a coat of primer and paint as the most durable, longest-lasting finish, but warns that it requires the most maintenance. An acceptable alternative, he says, is solid stain or natural-grain sealer, both of which have a more organic look than paint.

Among metals, Blackstone prefers steel, estimating her fees start at around \$100 a square foot. She also works with copper and bronze, but they are far more costly to use, she says, with bronze nearly double the price of steel. (One of her most striking gates is in bronze, shaped into graceful bamboo stalks that complement the El Cerrito home and garden's Asian characteristics.)

Practical prefab

If a custom gate isn't in the cards, however, there are plenty of less-expensive options. Big-box retailers such as Home Depot and Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse sell ready-made wood gates in a few styles. Prefab gates can also be found at local building-supply outlets, such as Broadmoor Lumber and Landscape Supply in South San Francisco and Mill Valley's Goodman Building Supply, which carries a lattice-topped gate and fence. Some lumberyards, such as Sierra Lumber and Fence in San Jose and Petaluma, will make gates to order.

Smith & Hawken sells decorative, welded steel powder-coated "garden structures," including gate, arch and trellis, at its stores and through its catalog. New and gently used gates can also be found at independent garden and antique shops.

When shopping for hardware, look for hinges strong enough to endure daily use, latches that are simple to operate, and try to keep both in concert with the character of the gate. Bear in mind that a gate, along with a fence or wall, makes a statement. Whether it's your basic, dog-eared redwood, or a cottage-style painted picket, a gateway says something about people and place.

"These things last a long time," notes Washer, who steers away from anything overbearing — nothing too Asian, too classical, or too fancy, for instance. "It has to sit for a long time, and integrate into the whole picture."

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