

**In brief**

WHAT Private garden designed by Gary Ratway and created from 2002 to 2004.

WHERE Northern California, USA.

SIZE Five acres.

SOIL Sandy loam. According to Gary, "It's wonderful soil to grow in."

CLIMATE Mild winters and relatively cool summers; windy.

SPECIAL FEATURES Terraces and secluded areas with planting designed for windy conditions.

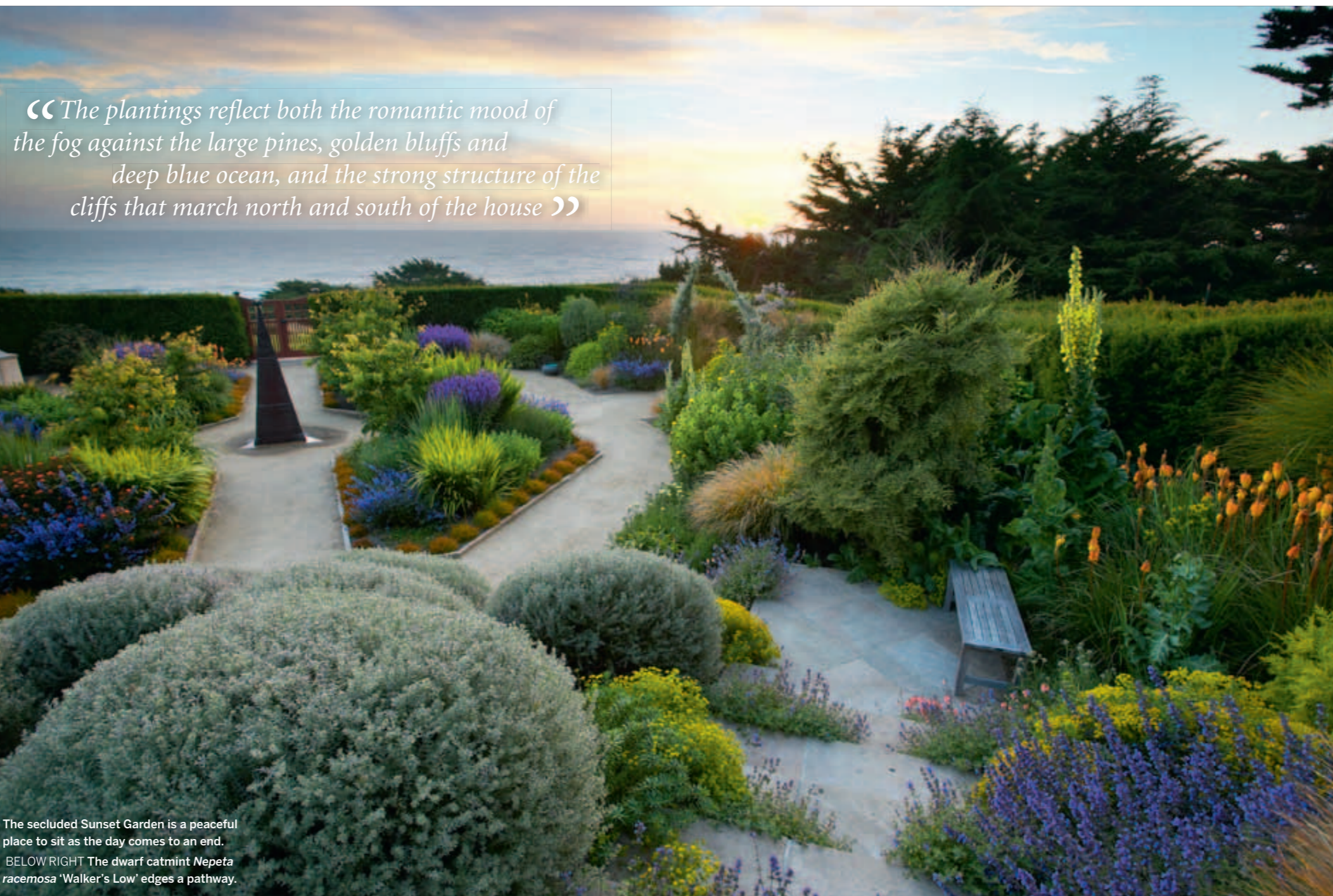
GARDEN PLAN See page 46

# Life's a breeze

In 2000, Sandra and Bill McIver decided to sell their California vineyard and retire to the cool climate of the coast. Now all they needed was a garden – and designer Gary Ratway was the man to help.

WORDS KATE FREY PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE TAKACS

A swathe of purple *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna' complements the blue shimmering sea in the distance.



“The plantings reflect both the romantic mood of the fog against the large pines, golden bluffs and deep blue ocean, and the strong structure of the cliffs that march north and south of the house”

The secluded Sunset Garden is a peaceful place to sit as the day comes to an end.  
BELOW RIGHT The dwarf catmint *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low' edges a pathway.

Sandra and Bill McIver's garden captures the essence of the coast. Its plantings reflect both the romantic mood of the fog against the large pines, golden bluffs and deep blue ocean, and the strong structure of the cliffs that march north and south of the house. The planting is designed to withstand the strong winds, with grasses that bend and sway. Myriad delicate plantings hug the ground in sheltered crevices in steps and below walls.

This retreat from the heat of inland California, on the Mendocino coast, is the home of Sandra and Bill McIver. Their stunning garden is the second major project the McIvers have commissioned from landscape designer Gary Ratway; they once owned the Matanzas Creek winery near Santa Rosa, where Gary designed a waving tide of grasses and impressionistic plantings to fringe four acres of lavender set against the rugged, dry hills of eastern Sonoma county. The couple were so pleased with Gary's work there that when they decided to retreat from the pressures of the wine business in 2000, they asked him to help them develop a piece of land on the coast. After building the garden's terraces, paths and retaining walls between 2002 and 2003, planting began in 2004.

A dramatic entrance

Arriving at the edge of the McIvers' land, low contorted pines (*Pinus contorta*) arch over the long drive. Soon you catch your first sight of the house, a dark shape against the dark ocean beyond.

The formal entry courtyard (pictured overleaf) mirrors the shape of the house

and is patterned with emerald squares of turf set in sandstone. Though the space is utilitarian – the turf has invisible structures underneath to support cars, and storage buildings are built into the hillside – it functions like a garden. It's a place of calm and peace; a place where the world disappears. Espaliered *Fremontodendron* softens the rammed-earth retaining walls; sombre planters stand in front of clouds of shimmering grasses and soft hedges. Crevices at the base of walls and up stairs (pictured far right, top) host delicate plants such as *Corydalis lutea*, beach aster (*Erigeron glaucus*), Lenten rose (*Helleborus orientalis*), dwarf catmint (*Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low') and *Epimedium x versicolor* 'Sulphureum'. Grey, rounded



BOTTOM LEFT The plants in the Sunset Garden reflect the colours of the sky and sea, from grey *Teucrium fruticans* to orange *Kniphofia* 'Apricot'.

BOTTOM RIGHT The entrance courtyard is set into a slope of soft grasses and shrubs, beneath the dark trunks of contorted pines.

BELOW Crevices in the steps host plants such as *Epimedium x versicolor* 'Sulphureum', with heart-shaped leaves and yellow flowers in spring.





The formal beauty of the entry courtyard is deceptive – it also serves as somewhere to park cars, while the doors on the far side lead to useful store rooms.

LEFT Pink *Erigeron glauca* edges the steps, while golden *Stipa gigantea* echoes the wild grasses beyond the garden.

“Gary Ratway has created a series of separate worlds here, each with a distinct atmosphere, so that as you explore the garden, its moods change almost as often as the ocean’s”

▷ balls of tree germander (*Teucrium fruticans*) flow from the hill and hedges of Botany Bay tea tree (*Correa alba*) act as delicately detailed room-dividers.

Beyond the courtyard lies a small entry garden. It’s surrounded by walls of rammed earth, broken by patterned wire grids with bowed tops that reflect the shape of the entry pergola at the front door. It is filled with scented plants such as *Magnolia* ‘Elizabeth’, the Japanese snowball (*Viburnum plicatum*), canary spurge (*Euphorbia mellifera*), common jasmine (*Jasminum officinale*), mock orange (*Philadelphus* ‘Belle Etoile’), the rose ‘Mendocino Gothic’, holly-leaved sweet spire (*Itea ilicifolia*) and fragrant rhododendrons. Though the walls were designed to stop the main force of the wind, they have created an unforeseen eddy that burns some of the plants, such as the spike witch hazel (*Corylopsis spicata*), planted for winter fragrance. *Geranium wallichianum* ‘Buxton’s Variety’ and the diminutive white wood aster (*A. divaricatus*) fill the lower spaces.

#### Secluded spot

A small path from the entry garden leads you through a hedge of *Correa alba* to the Sunset Garden. This is bordered with eight-foot tall yew hedges and planted with flowers in the colours of sunset. Gary created the garden after the strong structural entry court was finished. The first view of it is from the terrace around the house; this terrace is sunken and

walled for protection from the wind and its central focus is four cherry trees surrounding a central pyramidal obelisk. At the top of the garden there are a series of balled *Teucrium fruticans* and two weeping silver pears (*Pyrus salicifolia* ‘Pendula’) over a bench. Beds edged with golden heather are filled with plants such as *Stipa calamagrostis*, *Nepeta racemosa* ‘Walker’s Low’, *Kniphofia* ‘Apricot’, *Crocsmia x crocosmiiflora* ‘Solfatare’, *Geum* ‘Beech House Apricot’, *Thalictrum* ‘Elin’, *Eryngium pandanifolium*, *Euphorbia griffithii* ‘Dixter’, *Salvia nemorosa* ‘Caradonna’ and *Achillea* ‘Inca Gold’.

#### Sea views

When you leave this sheltered garden, the great expanse of ocean and cliffs confronts you. Immediately the plant palette changes to shapes, textures and colours that reflect the lines of gold and green bluffs receding into the distance. Zig-zag terrace paving and the capped low walls again capture the lines of the house and the bluffs in the distance. *Correa alba* hedges pick up the pale gold of the terrace sandstone and the texture of the rough, golden grasses that edge the terraces. Fountain grass (*Pennisetum orientale*) catches the pinky tone of the bluffs at sunset.

Blocks of grasses appear immune to the fierce, cold wind: these comprise *Muhlenbergia lindheimeri* and three reed grass species, *Calamagrostis nutkaensis*, *C. x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’ and *C. foliosa*. Below the terraces, to blend with the wild grasses beyond, Gary has planted an array ▷



LEFT Plantings beneath walls and on steps soften the effect of the bold hard landscaping, and add to the impression of lush growth.

OPPOSITE Grasses such as *Stipa calamagrostis* sway in the strong winds that sweep over the coast, and catch the light as the sun sets.



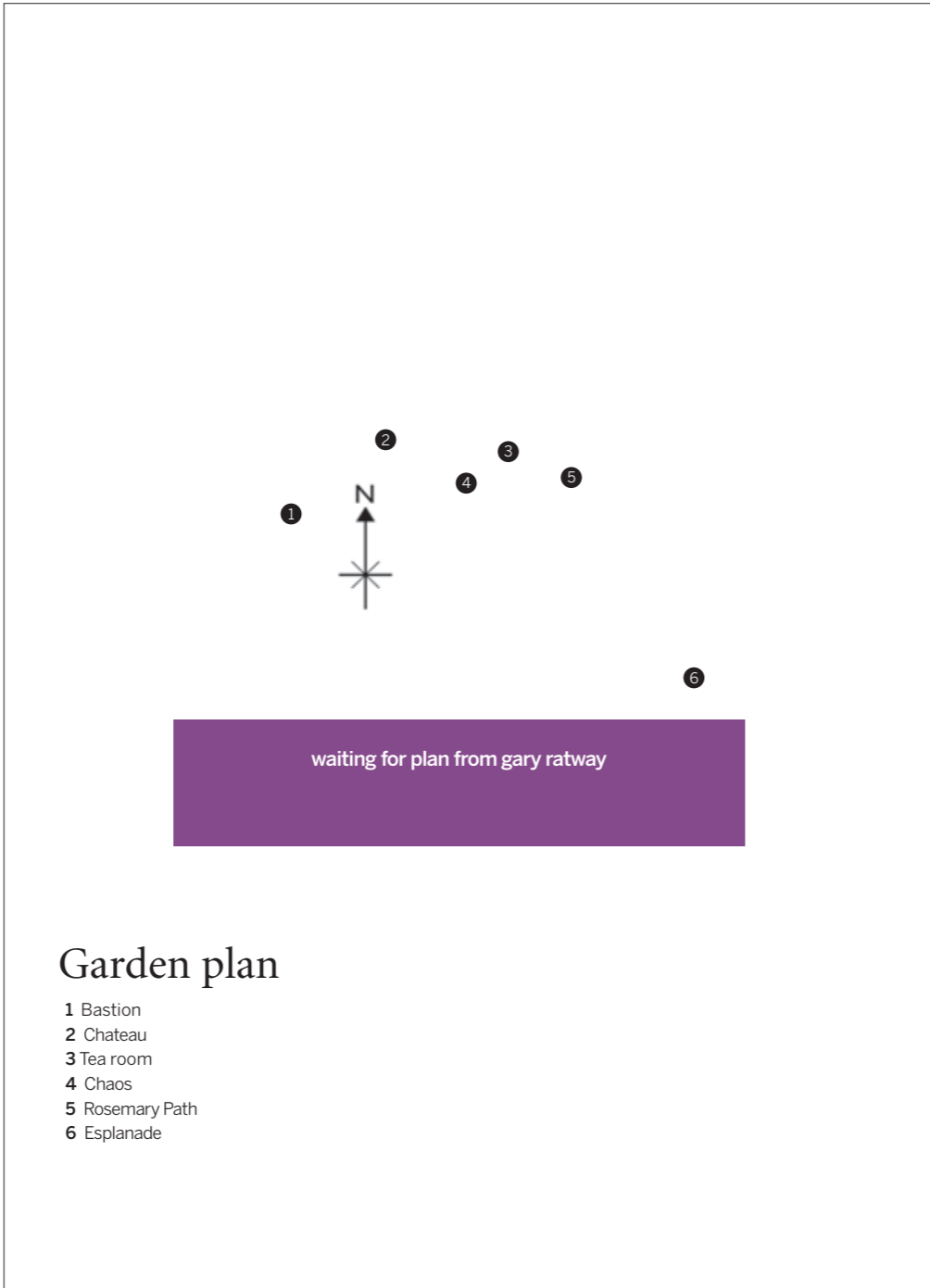
ABOVE Grasses mingle with perennials and clipped shrubs as the formal gardens slowly give way to wilder planting at the garden's margins.  
 OPPOSITE Steps lead up through shrubs such as aromatic *Euphorbia mellifera* to the slopes above, pictured on the opening pages of this feature.



▷ of native grasses from seed collected on the property. This side of the house has a series of magnificent stairway and crevice plantings. One long stairway has *Carex glaucescens* interspersed with *Erigeron glaucus*; another has a carpet of low-growing thymes. In another area humps of grey cotton lavender, *Santolina chamaecyparissus*, look like boulders, contrasting in form with delicate sea pinks (*Armeria*), catmints (*Nepeta*), savories (*Satureja*), thymes, *Erigeron glaucus* and stunning red *Lobelia laxiflora*.

Ever-changing moods  
 The McIver garden accomplishes much. From bold, repeating structural elements that firmly anchor the house to the bluff-top site, to pools of green calm, waving grasses that embrace the moods of the wind, to colours of grasslands and sunsets, to the miniature fairy-like world of step and crevice plantings, Gary Ratway has created a series of separate worlds here. Each has a distinct atmosphere, so that as you explore the garden, its moods change almost as often as the ocean's. □

**USEFUL INFORMATION**  
 Designer Gary Ratway is the co-owner of Digging Dog nursery, based nearby, and featured in issue 151, page 66.



### Stars of the sea

Designer Gary Ratway describes some of his favourite plants from the McIver garden

1 ??? *Artemisia* xxxxxxxxxxxxxx  
 Xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxxx.

2 *Kniphofia* 'Apricot'  
 Xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxxx.

3 *Verbascum x hybridum* 'Wega'  
 Xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxxx.

4 *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna'  
 Xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxxx.

5 *Lobelia tupa*  
 Xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxxx.

6 *Achillea* 'Inca Gold'  
 Xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxxx.

7 *Euphorbia griffithii* 'Dixter'  
 Xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxxx.

8 *Pennisetum orientale*  
 Xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxxx.



PLAN ILLUSTRATED BY SCOTT WOTHERSPOON