



# BETWEEN THE TREES

This Captiva oasis offers both privacy and openness as you go  
from the lushly landscaped garden to the beach.

BY MICHAEL KORB

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STAVARIDIS







While it's true that Southwest Florida has a number of stunning locations and hidden gems, when locals are looking for that nearby diamond in the rough, they cross the Sanibel Causeway and escape to a place that feels a world away: lush landscapes, quiet roads, natural settings, beautiful beaches. And it's that reality that turns visitors into residents.

At least that's how it went for the owners of this gorgeous 1.5-acre slice of Captiva. The couple began visiting decades ago from their native Minnesota and eventually purchased a condo at South

Seas Island Resort, just minutes from this location. But when they spotted a vacant lot for sale, they knew the time was right to build their dream home and surround it with a curated jungle.

For the design, they found inspiration on the other side of the planet. "We were in Singapore and we went to a rain forest, and then, right across from our hotel were these big gardens," the homeowner says. "It was perfect timing. I didn't know there were so many types of palm trees. I just knew I wanted color and I wanted some annuals by the driveway.

I was just paying attention to things that I've been attracted to for a long time."

So the homeowner would send pictures back to the landscape architects of what she liked. That consciousness helped the designers involved make her vision—a mix of formal structure with equal parts tropical lushness—a reality with rare lipstick palms, Cuban petticoat palms, Copernicia alba and red feather palms interspersed with bromeliads, ginger, foxtail ferns, philodendron Xanadu and Carissa emerald blanket. Flowering trees such

Two sea grape trees come together to form an arch for this custom gate entry, accented with medjool date palms' silvery fronds. Previous page: Designed by landscape architect Mariah Bakke, the landscaping of this 1.5-acre property in Captiva looks like a beautifully cultivated and curated jungle. Coconut palms flank the drive, while winin palms stand against the house. Bromeliads and coral boulders accent the shellstone driveway.

**Landscape architect:** Mariah Bakke, R.S. Walsh Landscaping **Architect:** Bill Jacobelli **Builder:** Wolter Group.









At the front entrance, you'll find three planters with a fiddle leaf fig, aptenia vine and mixed tropical foliage. The house has built-in planters in front that hold various tropical palms and ground covers, including lady palm, Kentia palm, alocasia and more. The property has undergone a significant transformation. "Friends of ours are amazed because it looked like Florida scrap land when we bought it," the homeowner says.











as tabebuia and poincianas help create a canopy of color overhead—an ever-changing palette of beauty.

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Landscape architect Mariah Bakke, who was working for R.S. Walsh Landscaping at the time (she now has her own design firm, Viva Landscapes) knew the homeowners wanted the property to feel very private, even though it was quite open and exposed in the back. She ordered a

dozen 50-foot tall coconut palms and arranged them to frame the view to the Gulf. To that she added bamboo and traveler palms. The area between the beach and the expansive lawn is bridged by a boardwalk that allows for the natural berm and scrub plants to remain untouched.

“The way we designed it, it’s very inviting to go to the beach,” Bakke says. “At the back of the home you have more color—bougainvillea, hibiscus, etc. They asked for an open lawn concept for the kids and grandkids. That is why the backyard is great for

games and playing. And they had a little historic beach shack (that was grandfathered in). So we kept it and created that boardwalk that takes you through the transition from the open lawn.”

Moving from the lawn to the beach, the landscapers switched the plant palette to more native flora: periwinkle, dune sunflower and other blooming plants before the walk deposits you just steps from the water.

Out front, along the road, a massive sea grape tree was shaped to create a tunnel of greenery upon entry—into a se-

Bakke knew the homeowners wanted the property to feel private, even though it was quite open and exposed in the back. She ordered a dozen 50-foot tall coconut palms and arranged them to frame the view to the Gulf. To that she added the bamboo and traveler palms. “I didn’t know there were so many types of palm trees,” the homeowner says. “I just knew I wanted color and I wanted some annuals by the driveway. I was just paying attention to things that I’ve been attracted to for a long time.”





Triangle palms in modern planters add scale to this expansive pool deck. Bromeliads and vines lend an extra dimension to the planters. The striking zero-edge pool benefits from potted plants, such as palms, herbs (rosemary, cilantro, basil, chives) and key lime trees. Once in the pool, the elevations make it appear as though the water melds seamlessly with the Gulf.











cret garden, if you will—filled in with medjool date palms, Fiji fan palms, crotons, heliconia, dwarf sugar palms, cordyline and bromeliads.

“We definitely wanted that wall of privacy up front and we wanted some color in it,” the homeowner adds. “(The landscapers) showed us some options that were really formal and some that were like you were in a tropical garden. We went for a mix of some clean space and some of the foliage here and there. And

because our house is sort of close to the road we wanted a circular planting area that helped hide the house from the road.”

The curves of the driveway allow for a more organic visual upon entry, where soft, thick zoysia grass appears to ebb and flow like waves across the beach. Isolated islands of vegetation show off key palm specimens (such as the aforementioned lipstick palms and Cuban petticoat palms), while layers of lower plants move the eye upward and

across. Closer to the house, the driveway becomes a grid pattern where pavers are broken up by artificial turf to create a stylish motor court surrounded by palms. It’s especially glamorous at night. “That turned out very pretty,” Bob Walsh, of R.S. Walsh Landscaping, says. “We put in a couple arbors and the planters that go across the front of the house ... that softens and warms the whole house.”

That vegetation adds life and an organic texture to the more

“The homeowner had a vision and our job the whole way through was to make that vision come true and make it work with the amount of salt coming off the Gulf and the amount of shade we were creating out front,” Bob Walsh, of R.S. Walsh, says. “We went in early to create the frame for the artwork, and the artwork is the Gulf.”





Bringing in large coconut palms was the first priority in creating the ultimate vista for this backyard. There's an expansive sod area for kids to play and blooming color, like hibiscus and bougainvillea, everywhere you look. "The way we designed it, it's very inviting to go to the beach," Bakke says. "At the back of the home you have more color—bougainvillea, hibiscus, etc. They asked for an open lawn concept for the kids and grandkids. That is why the backyard is great for games and playing."













modernist, flat-edged home, engaging the eye to dance from the one layer to the next against the static structure.

Out back, the stunning zero-edge pool benefits from potted plants such as palms, herbs (rosemary, cilantro, basil, chives, etc.) and key lime trees, which improve any cocktail. And when in the pool, the elevations make it appear as though the water melds seamlessly with the Gulf.

Of course, with this proximity to the sea, it's not only about aesthetics—it's about placement.

Ask anyone who's tried to go it alone and plant something pretty without professional help and you'll quickly discover that the salt air can be a fickle friend. So Bakke and Walsh set about to place salt-tolerant palms and plants where needed.

"Our job the whole way through was to make the homeowner's vision come true and make it work with the amount of salt coming off the Gulf and the amount of shade we were creating out front," Walsh says. That meant the team had to move

things around in order to make the addition of fruit trees, such as avocado, mango and Meyer lemons, work long-term, finding the space where they would get proper light but still be protected from the fairly big salt storms the area is prone to. "We went in early to create the frame for the artwork," Walsh adds. "And the artwork is the Gulf."

The project turned out so nicely that the family also purchased the lot directly across the street, giving them access on the Gulf and bay sides. ❧

An elevated boardwalk was created in order to leave the dune vegetation undisturbed. And, in this area there is quite a variety, including sea oats, dune sunflowers and golden creepers. A small historic beach shack sits on the property not far from the surf. "So we kept it and created that boardwalk that takes you through the transition from the open lawn," Bakke says. As you move from the lawn to the beach, the plant palette switches to more native flora—periwinkle, dune sunflower and other blooming plants—before the walk deposits you just steps from the water.