



# places for gathering

*How one family's approach to making the indoor to outdoor transition a seamless one*

by Bruce Giffin

What are the elements that turn the typical outdoor areas of a home into extraordinary living spaces? Clay Nelson and his wife Susan took the time, planning and patience to create such spots for their family.

The first thing the Nelsons did was create a master plan for the outdoor living spaces that they wanted. Built on a slope, their home's back elevation is two stories tall and overlooks a wildlife corridor. Their top priority was to construct a deck that would be a comfortable gathering place for family and friends conveniently located near their home's living room and kitchen. The next requirement was a place for the spa that was convenient, yet private, but wasn't exclusively a grown-ups' domain; a smaller, more intimate spot near the master bedroom (sheltered by plants for privacy yet big enough for a chaise lounge and side table), would serve the purpose for an 'adult' respite.

While their plans were being approved by the building department (verifying that

their blueprints were current and paid particular attention to foundation design, fire area requirements, guard rail and stair safety, as well as ensuring that the decks would stay well out of the setbacks of the wildlife corridor), Clay was obtaining quotes and proposals. With budget in mind, the Nelsons decided to phase the work over a period of years. At the same time, they wanted to get big parts of it completed so that they could begin enjoying their use.

First, they built the largest portion of the deck off the southwest corner of the house that serves as the outdoor living and dining room. The main area measures 18 feet by 16 feet, which allows for a 5' diameter table and comfortable chairs plus plenty of room for people to move around easily, as well as accommodating a number of potted plants and orchids that help to soften the feeling of the space.

For longevity, construction heart redwood decking was installed over pressure treated wood joists. A nice touch was "blind nailing" the deck boards with finish nails on the edges of the boards instead of nailing

straight down through the top. This makes for a more barefoot friendly deck.

For the first year and a half no one really used the deck until the Nelsons bought a comfy set of chairs and a table. The kids discovered it as a great place to hang out and, for the last several years, the deck has been the neighborhood gathering place for the Nelson kids and their friends.

For the second phase the Nelsons built the spa alcove deck adjacent to the main living area. It's just big enough so that the self-contained spa nestles neatly into it. The deck's structure was engineered to support the weight of the spa and the people using it. A trellis was built overhead to provide partial shade while still allowing the spa users to see the stars. Around the perimeter of the guardrail, the Nelsons installed flowerboxes of red and purple geraniums that enhance the sense of intimacy and privacy from the outside world.

Connecting to nature, hanging from the trellis are four hummingbird feeders which the Nelsons refill daily. Red tailed hawks, scrub jays and swallows fly overhead and around the deck. Coyotes and other creatures use the wildlife corridor. An avocado tree provides fruit for guacamole, while orange trees provide the juice for Sunday morning brunches.

On the south side around the corner is a six foot wide passage area that is the favored area for sun bathing. From there, steps lead down half a level to a patio where the Nelsons planted several trees to provide year round shade. Beyond, paths lead down into flower gardens and terraces along the slope.

As time went by, the Nelsons continued improving their home. A few hundred square feet were added to create a more comfortable master bedroom suite. The deck passageway along the west side of the Nelson's home was extended to the master bedroom. Off the master bedroom a new sliding glass door was installed which leads out to their private 9' x 10' alcove where a big, comfortable chaise lounge and side table are placed for reading the Sunday paper or taking afternoon naps.

One step at a time, the Nelsons have created a home and property that feels like it could be in Maui. Tropical plants and palms are planted and all year long there are different flowers blooming. These extraordinary spaces now work as they were designed—to serve their family as they enjoy living in the foothills of Santa Barbara.

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