

"You drive up an enormously long driveway to get to the house, so I wanted to create a dramatic moment that says, 'You've arrived,'" notes landscape designer Daniel Nolan of the plants he chose for the front of the family's home. Huge, striking *Furcraea macdougallii* are underplanted with smaller 'Blue Glow' agave and a groundcover of 'Angelina' stonecrop. Softer olive trees ease the transition to the backyard.

# d r e a m      s c a p e

photographs by  
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It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a budding landscape designer: carte blanche to create his ideal of a breathtaking, low-maintenance, water-wise garden in Northern California. With great care and thought, he turned his vision into a reality, and established his now-trademark style.

# Daniel Nolan vividly remembers the moment he met The One.

He was hunched over a collection of pots while working on the sales floor of San Francisco's Flora Grubb Gardens, when Bridget McIver asked for some plant recommendations. She bought everything he suggested and, a few weeks later, sought him out for more ideas. Then she called with a proposal: Would he redesign her whole yard? "I call her the unicorn of clients," says Nolan. "She was so trusting; she just said, 'I want you to do your thing.'"

Nolan's signature low-water gardens are at once minimalist and unexpected—and have made him one of the most sought-after landscape designers in the Bay Area today. But this project, which he started just as he was transitioning to Grubb's design team in 2012, was his first big one. "I thought of it as my laboratory, a place to experiment with all the plants I wanted to see in the world," he says. And what a lab: a sprawling property, much of it in full sun, surrounding a striking home.

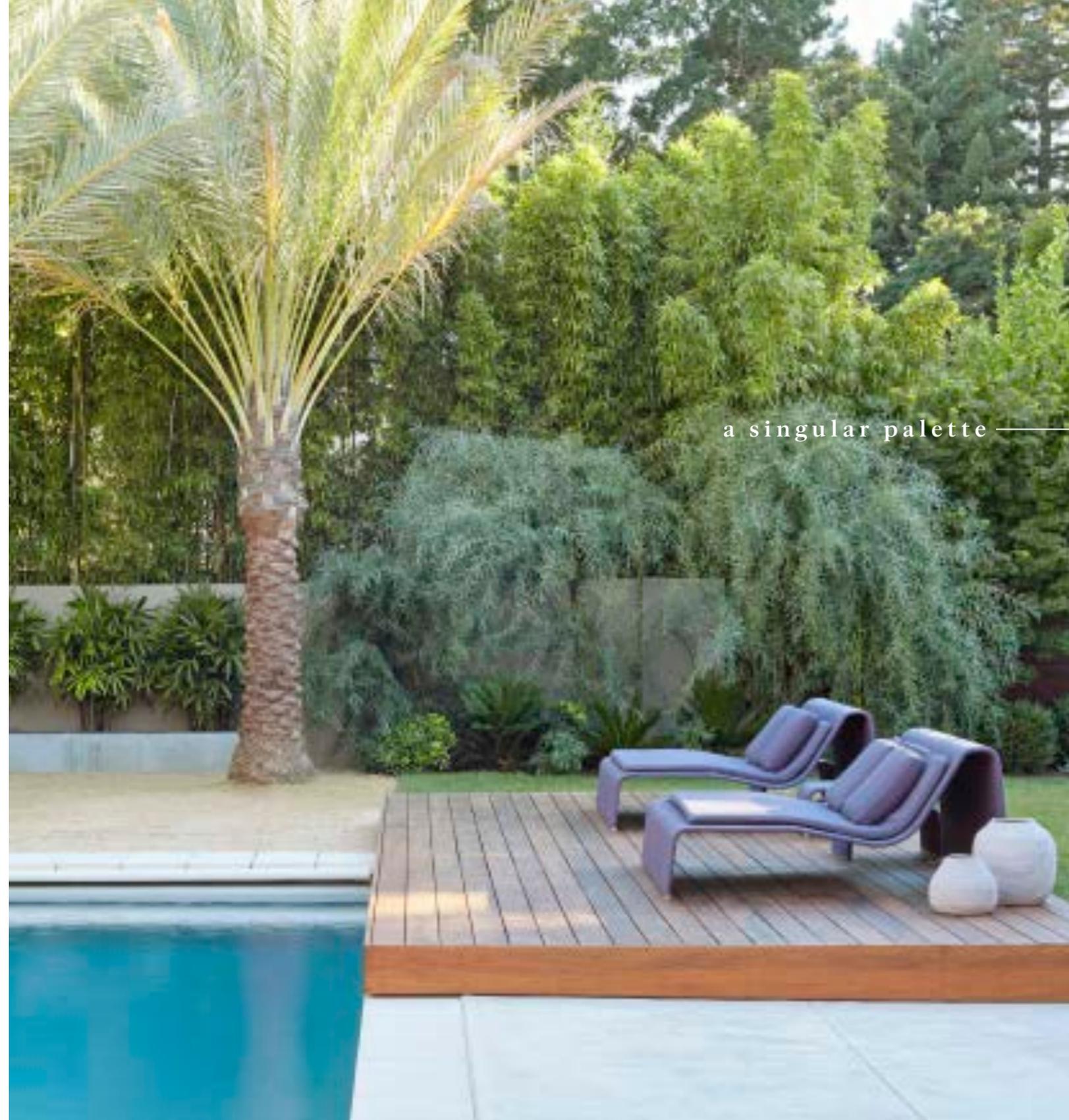
The existing garden took its cues from the house, with a handful of architectural plants in precise rows. "The idea was to keep it modern, but turn it into a real plant lover's garden," he says. Nolan's vision was shaped by the unusual cultivars he works with at Flora Grubb. When he spotted some commanding *Furcraea macdougallii* on a nursery-buying trip, for example, he knew they had the star power he'd been seeking for the front of the home.

He made equally bold choices in the nearly 15,000-square-foot backyard. While McIver and her husband didn't want to lose their entire lawn (they have two children), Nolan convinced them to break it up with gravel courtyards. Not only was this a practical move in drought-prone California, but it allowed him to create discrete destinations within the landscape, from a bocce court to a small sculpture garden, thus "encouraging the eye to travel," he says. His mix of colors and textures completed the visual story: Warmly shaded varieties near the house give way to a cooler palette along the walls, while structural succulents and stately palms balance out wispy acacia and flowering kangaroo paw. The effect is clean but not stark—both mindful and playful.

It's also wonderfully hands-off. The plants, mostly perennials, require little pruning or water; from late fall through spring, they survive on rain alone. In fact, while other California gardens withered away during the drought, this one thrived: The leucadendrons have exploded, and the sago palms even started producing flower cones. "Some plants doubled in a year," he says. "It's been astounding." The only downside, he admits, is that McIver hasn't been into the shop since the garden was completed. "But that's a good sign," he says. "A quiet client is usually a very happy client."



▲ Nolan (top) designed a living wall of *Tillandsia*, or air plants, in his clients' dining room. He mapped out the design with painters' tape, then installed 60 "Thigmotropes," air-plant holders designed by Flora Grubb Garden. Every two weeks, the *Tillandsia* need to be removed and soaked in water for 20 minutes, but otherwise, they basically take care of themselves.



a singular palette

The designer stuck to serene shades of green around the pool. "Using just one color is relaxing and engaging at the same time," Nolan says. A pair of towering palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*) anchor the scene, while silvery willow wattle (*Acacia iteaphylla*) stands out against the bamboo behind it. Plantings along the perimeter include (from left) a row of lady palms (*Rhapis humilis*), *Pittosporum tobira* 'Wheeler's Dwarf', sago palm (*Cycas revoluta*), chartreuse hellebores (*Helleborus foetidus*), variegated Japanese aralia (*Fatsia japonica* 'Variegata'), and boxwood.



breathing room

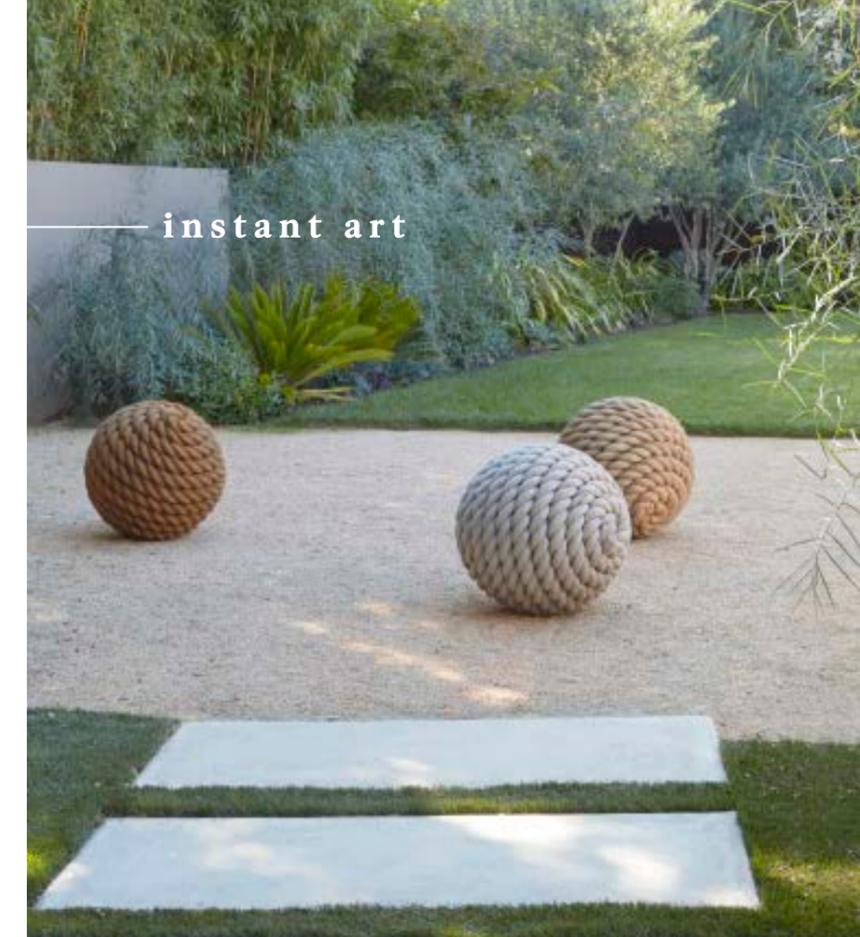
To create a quiet moment on a small patio at the side of the house, Nolan chose two tropical plants with major presence: a sago palm and a spineless yucca (*Yucca elephantipes*), both of which have small enough root balls to survive in stoneware containers. (The bocce court is on the other side of the wall.) A plug-in heated bench is an inviting place to kick back, while dense bamboo offers privacy from neighbors.

THE DETAILS: Evia lounge, \$5,900, [galanterandjones.com](http://galanterandjones.com).

Nolan filled a long raised bed that wraps around the house with red 'Safari Sunset' leucadendron and 'Orange Cross' kangaroo paws; their fiery colors and masses of texture add wildness to the otherwise orderly landscape. "Cactus would have read like Palm Springs," he says. "I wanted to play to our Northern California surroundings by planting something looser."



A handful of thoughtfully placed rope spheres by artist Topher Delaney turned a neutral patch into a peaceful sculpture garden. They're displayed on a mix of decomposed granite and Lodi gravel, a lawn alternative that also acts as a weed barrier. The plantings along the wall shift from bright green to more subdued shades, including (from left) wispy willow wattle, *Pittosporum tobira* 'Wheeler's Dwarf', mounds of variegated Japanese aralia, yellow-green sago palm, hellebores, grasslike New Zealand flax (*Phormium* 'Yellow Wave'), and an olive tree.



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