

WRITINGS



Organized Gardens and Gazpacho

BY JOHN TROSKO

MY FATHER, SERGE, is an amazing and well-organized gardener. At over 80 years old, he still grows delicious tomatoes, zucchini, cucumbers, and green beans in his small New Jersey town. The asparagus, once a mainstay, is now too bitter to eat. But he has some wild strawberries thrown in for good measure and a compost heap as tall as the Empire State Building.

My father is *very* protective about his organic vegetable garden. Even now, though a full-grown adult, I am not allowed to set foot on those grounds unsupervised. As a teenager, I'd sneak into the garden, grab summer's best, and blend up some gazpacho for a quick lunch.

And then there are the green spaces I don't have to sneak into, such as the ones my friend Denise and I visited this past weekend. We treated ourselves to a garden tour with Olive Branches, a nonprofit organization dedicated to greening the Los Angeles landscape. The self-guided tour took us through six private gardens in the upscale Windsor Square and Hancock Park sections of Los Angeles. Surprising gardens included a tropical paradise on North McCadden, a historic landscape on South Hudson, an Italianate garden on South Lorraine, and an English cottage on South Plymouth. Perhaps some were too park-like in design, but all were beautiful.

(As a professional organizer, I am all about ease of use and simplicity, and I wondered how much time is spent on these peaceful retreats. I suppose it's not about the time spent but the value and beauty they bring. Yes.)

The most spectacular was the Mediterranean garden at La Casa de Las Campanas on North June Street. Spanish Colonial Revival architecture played

nicely with the zero-scaping, drought-tolerant plants that included lavender, fescue, and Mexican sage. Though the after-tour poolside cocktail party was indeed dreamy, so was the home: A sneak peek at the butler's pantry, just off the main kitchen, revealed striking oak cabinetry with glass fronts, crown molding, and crisp white lights. With the exception of a half-read Sunday *Los Angeles Times*, the counters were void of disorganization. The tall stately cabinets held a polished collection of silver urns, vases, bowls, pitchers, and goblets—all lined up like soldiers waiting to go into battle (or in their case, dinner).

Perhaps my favorite landscape was at the Arts and Crafts home on South Van Ness. Built at the turn of the 20th century (and replete with a two-car garage—progressive for that era), the property is squared by a red-brick garden path lined with a simple herb garden complete with white pebble stones and brass labels. A vintage Victorian-style six-inch fence wards off the critters from nibbling on the basil, oregano, thyme, and parsley that slightly drape over the walkway.

But some critters do sneak in from time to time. The docent told me about the owner's friend, a chef who visits weekly for a cooking class they oversee. Before heading for the kitchen, the family friend sneaks through the gate, grabs a handful of herbs for the students, and heads right back out the gate without much stirring. Much like I used to do in my father's garden: *Hurry and grab what you need before Dad sees you.*

I think I'll have some gazpacho for lunch this week. And call my dad.