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Her passage to India

Mala Vasan wanted to transform her small yard in Hollywood. Tucked behind a 1924 Spanish bungalow and hemmed in by her own garage as well as her neighbor's, Vasan's yard was attractive "only to a family of skunks that used to walk across the space," she says. She turned to landscape designer **Laura Morton**, and in their conversations they eventually discussed a lush oasis influenced by the home's Spanish-style architecture, Mala's Indian American heritage and the two women's mutual love of travel.



Christine Cotter / Los Angeles Times

"She showed me a file of imagery she'd been daydreaming about, including exotic pictures of India with elephants," Morton says. In the end, the 16-by-32-foot patio was re-imagined as a two-level courtyard that feels far away from Los Angeles. "Enclosed spaces instill a sense of intimacy," Morton says, "and within that your own sense of paradise is possible."

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Small Hollywood Hills backyard becomes an India-inspired 'jewel box' By **Debra Prinzing**

If you're looking for a good excuse to invest in landscaping, Mala Vasan's is hard to beat. She credits her dreamy mix of Indian and Moroccan inspirations for seducing her sweetheart.

"My garden brings out an inner magic," says Vasan, a producer of TV commercials who was going out to eat with screenwriter Brian P. Regan when he saw the enchanting outdoor space and said, "Forget it. Let's stay here and order Chinese food."

With scented blossoms, dancing flames, the sound of spilling water and chaises large enough

for two, the intimate setting is, indeed, full of romance. ("Our first dates were on those couches," Vasan says.) The garden also is an artful antithesis of what it used to be: a driveway too small for a car and a 560-square-foot backyard dominated by a wobbly brick patio and views of a boxy air-conditioner hanging from the neighbor's garage.

The transformation of this Hollywood Hills property earned its creator, Laura Morton of West Hollywood, a gold medal last year from the **Assn. of Professional Landscape Designers**.

*Designer
Laura Morton was
hired to create an
exotic, cozy retreat
and garden.*

For Vasan, the thoughtful design was proof that tiny details and a vivid imagination could turn a prosaic space into a pretty and practical retreat.

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Vasan first contacted Morton in 2005 after seeing a chapter about the designer's personal Moorish- and Mediterranean-themed sanctuary in a book called *Secret Gardens of Hollywood and Private Oases in Los Angeles*.

"Laura's own garden was my biggest influence," Vasan says. "This was the woman for me."

Vasan worried her project might be too modest for Morton to take on: Tucked behind a 1924 Spanish bungalow, the small backyard was hemmed in by Vasan's garage, her neighbor's garage and an elderly retaining wall. The space was attractive "only to a family of skunks that used to walk across the space," Vasan says.

In their conversations, designer and client envisioned an oasis influenced by the home's Spanish-style architecture, Mala's Indian-American heritage and the two women's mutual love of travel.

"Mala wrote down lists of things she wanted—that was the producer in her," Morton says. "We talked about her favorite places to travel, and she showed me a file of imagery she'd been daydreaming about, including exotic pictures of India with elephants. That's very helpful to convey the feeling you want to a designer."

The 16-by-32-foot patio was re-imagined as a two-level courtyard that felt far from L.A., the designer says. "Enclosed spaces instill a sense of intimacy, and within that, your own sense of paradise is possible." To give the tiny garden its drama, Morton created the effect of an overhead canopy by planting an 8-foot-tall *Phoenix roebelenii* palm and by hanging lights.

The upper part of the new courtyard has a raised reflecting pool that runs toward the lower part of the courtyard, where large chaises face an elevated natural gas fire pit. A curtain of water spills from the pool and seemingly into the flames, which rise from layers of crushed white glass that lend sparkle to the scene.

Brown slabs of sandstone replaced the aging brick. Spaces between the stone created pockets for

planting *Teucrium x lucidrys*, a low-growing herb, and a type of *Campanula* ground cover.

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Morton recommended replastering the bungalow to even out the patchy stucco and to change the "bandage-beige" color to a creamy white. The trim—a mahogany-chocolate with purple undertones—was custom-mixed after Morton scanned a piece of palm bark and had it color-matched by the painter.

Once they decided on the backdrop, they turned to accent colors for the garden. Of the tile choices for the water feature, Vasan was drawn to an encaustic cement tile with a Moorish-style lavender-blue and white pattern—not a tough decision, given that purple is her favorite color.

"We included different shades of purple and brown flowers and added drama with magenta and brighter tones of blue-violet and lavender to echo the tile colors," Morton says.

Lavender-blue bearded irises, *Coleus* 'Inky Fingers,' *Aeonium arboreum* 'Zwartkop,' the heliotrope 'Black Beauty' and a scented, burgundy-colored Australian willow myrtle (*Agonis flexuosa* 'After Dark') contribute a purple spectrum of foliage and blooms. Deep plum upholstery envelop the thick banquette cushions, which look vibrant against the creamy white stucco benches and new retaining wall.

Morton cleverly masked the neighbor's garage with a triple arcade of antique wood arches from India. The center arch is aligned with the pool and fire pit; twinkling lights and a fragrant jasmine vine fill the opening. The side arches are backed with mirrors, which add visual depth and reflect leaves and flowers back into the garden. The plantings are subtly layered, so it's not obvious there are any mirrors.

An antique double-door from Rajasthan, India, transformed the front of Vasan's one-car garage. The existing plumbago, jasmine and morning glory that once sprawled recklessly over a muddy, uneven driveway were cut back. They're now trained on a new mesh framework to create a flowering wall along the property line, replacing a 3-foot chain-link fence.

The sandstone slabs and decomposed granite create a new permeable floor under a custom tile bistro table and chairs for Vasan's dinner parties. Amber and purple carnival lights crisscross the space overhead. Potted citrus trees, rosemary, African blue basil and scented pelargonium lend fragrance to the setting.

"My father was from Madras, and I began eating Indian food at a very young age," says Vasan, whose dinner party menu might include keema, chicken tikka masala, saag paneer, saffron rice and ginger margaritas. "Everyone brings their plates outside and finds a place to sit in the garden," she says. "This is an extension of my entertaining space—something magical and unique."

The project's intimate scale begged for personal touches. Instead of standard landscape lighting,

Morton called upon mirrors to reflect the warm glow of amber lanterns. Pierced metal Moroccan lamps with colored light bulbs cast decorative patterns against the house.

A set of carved wood shutters, also from India, replaced a vinyl white window on the side of Mala's garage. The L-shaped banquette seating is piled high with silk sari throw pillows—including a few jeweled elephant-patterned pillows.

"She wanted elephants somewhere in this design," Morton says. "Small as it is, Mala's garden is quite detailed, like a little jewel box."

Vasan calls it her sanctuary. "When I'm at such a frenetic pace, this garden seems otherworldly to me," she says. "It's somewhere I can come to be with my friends and a loved one and just relax. The word that comes to mind for me is 'wonderment.'"



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