

## Gardens flourishing despite rain, sadness

Susan Fornoff, Chronicle Staff Writer  
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Lisa Guthrie and Stephen Suzman in a garden they designed on a garage rooftop. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse



Chronicle / Eric Luse

Stephen Suzman and Lisa Guthrie mixed pride with heavy hearts on Wednesday and managed some smiles in the formal terraced gardens of greens and whites they created for the San Francisco Decorator Showcase.

The pair had struggled for two months to get new plants into soggy ground during the unusually long rainy season, when, on April 12, Guthrie lost her husband of 45 years, Walter, and her home in a Mill Valley mudslide.

Two days before Walter's memorial, Lisa uneasily found her way into the city from Walnut Creek, where she has been staying with family, to stand by Suzman for showcase media day.

"I can't tell you how much I admire her," he said.

She was wearing a pantsuit that might have merged into the exterior of the mansion were it not for a colorful, geometric scarf. "Somehow it survived the slide," she said. "It was on a hanger."

Guthrie and Suzman had won the honor in February of landscaping the gardens, atop a new garage and along the old driveway, with virtually a blank slate.

After all that happened, he said, "I think what we had envisioned in the end got done, although it was fairly nightmarish because we couldn't get in to do any work because there's an underground garage, most of this is on structure, this is a new terrace, we had to demolish the existing driveway and create terraces, we couldn't plant while it was soggy, and if we'd had bad weather the last week, there would be no garden."

Oh, he said, another thing: "A lot of plants were not available in the nurseries, so we had to accept substitutes. We got a lot of Boston ferns, which are not normally used out of doors. And I'll show you a plant which I've never seen for sale in the Bay Area before."

"And I've never seen it except for in the wild," Guthrie said.

That would be the Solomon's Seal (*polygonatum*), with large green spikes and tiny white flowers. Other features of the garden include life-size sculptures of Diana and Hercules on the main terrace and herms (columns with heads on top) peeking out from hiding places. There's also a stunning trompe l'oeil mirror, which Suzman designed, sitting on the edge of a small lawn abutting a multihued green parterre.

"I've discovered lime green, or chartreuse, as a color," Suzman said. "So we used some accents of that here and there."

With the bay trees and climbing rose left from the garden's old incarnation, the overall effect is classical. Suzman and Guthrie are quite sure that Walter, himself a landscape architect, would have applauded.

"I think one reason why we stayed married so long was that we never talked shop," Lisa said. "But I was going to drag him here because I was really pleased with the way it turned out. I think he would have approved."

Suzman nodded. "He would have approved, because he did very beautiful formal gardens too."

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