

Project name & location: **Blue Oak Hills, Sonoma County, CA**
Category 1: Design, Residential Garden Design
ASLA, Southern California chapter, 2016 Quality of Life Design Awards

Introduction

Nestled in the vast oak woodland of Sonoma County, Blue Oak Hills demonstrates a glorious fusion of function and grace that offers a powerful model for sustainable landscape architecture. This project rejuvenated a degraded ecosystem while shaping places for the clients to experience the dramatic poetry of the surrounding landscape: a majestic oak canopy, broad sky, and stunning light. The project's design and implementation manifest a commitment to protect and augment the inherent beauty and native ecosystem of this exceptional site.

Quality of Life

The design for Blue Oak Hills improved the clients' quality of life by enriching their experience of the landscape, while also augmenting the quality of the landscape itself. Outdoor living areas were carefully tailored so that the client could comfortably enjoy the landscape and its ephemeral qualities throughout the day and year. The use of native plants and local stone created strong associations both visually and ecologically between the landscape and the rolling woodland hills beyond. These links to the broader, rejuvenated landscape connect the clients to seasonal rhythms and the restorative power of nature.

Water Systems

To strengthen the ecological health of the site, the landscape architect employed multiple sustainable strategies to improve water quality and recharge the groundwater, including pervious paving, massed native plantings on slopes, and a designed "stone river" swale that slows, aerates and infiltrates rainwater. The beauty of the landscape and its precious groundwater is boldly celebrated with liquid planes of water – a pool, a spa, a runnel – that mirror the surrounding sculptural oaks and the ever-changing movement of clouds, birds, and butterflies. In this way, simple and elegant design gestures reveal the rich complexity in the landscape.

Stewardship of the Land

In order to create a dramatic landscape while treading lightly on the land, the guiding philosophy throughout the project was "minimal moves for maximum effect." This ethic is evident in the relatively small footprint of built areas as well and in the minimal grading of existing slopes. The design team was thoroughly committed to stewardship, remaining engaged with the site over several years in order to make observations and adapt as needed. This commitment resulted in a robust, rejuvenated landscape that now provides habitat for pipevine swallowtails, native birds and bees, bobcats, and native plant volunteers.

Blue Oak Hills is truly a compelling model for the successful integration of sustainable strategies with bold design language in order to rejuvenate ecosystems, amplify beauty in the landscape, and improve the quality of life in California and beyond.