

# This Old House

LOW-MAINTENANCE DECKING • BEST SHOVELS • EASY POOL CARE

## create the ideal landscape

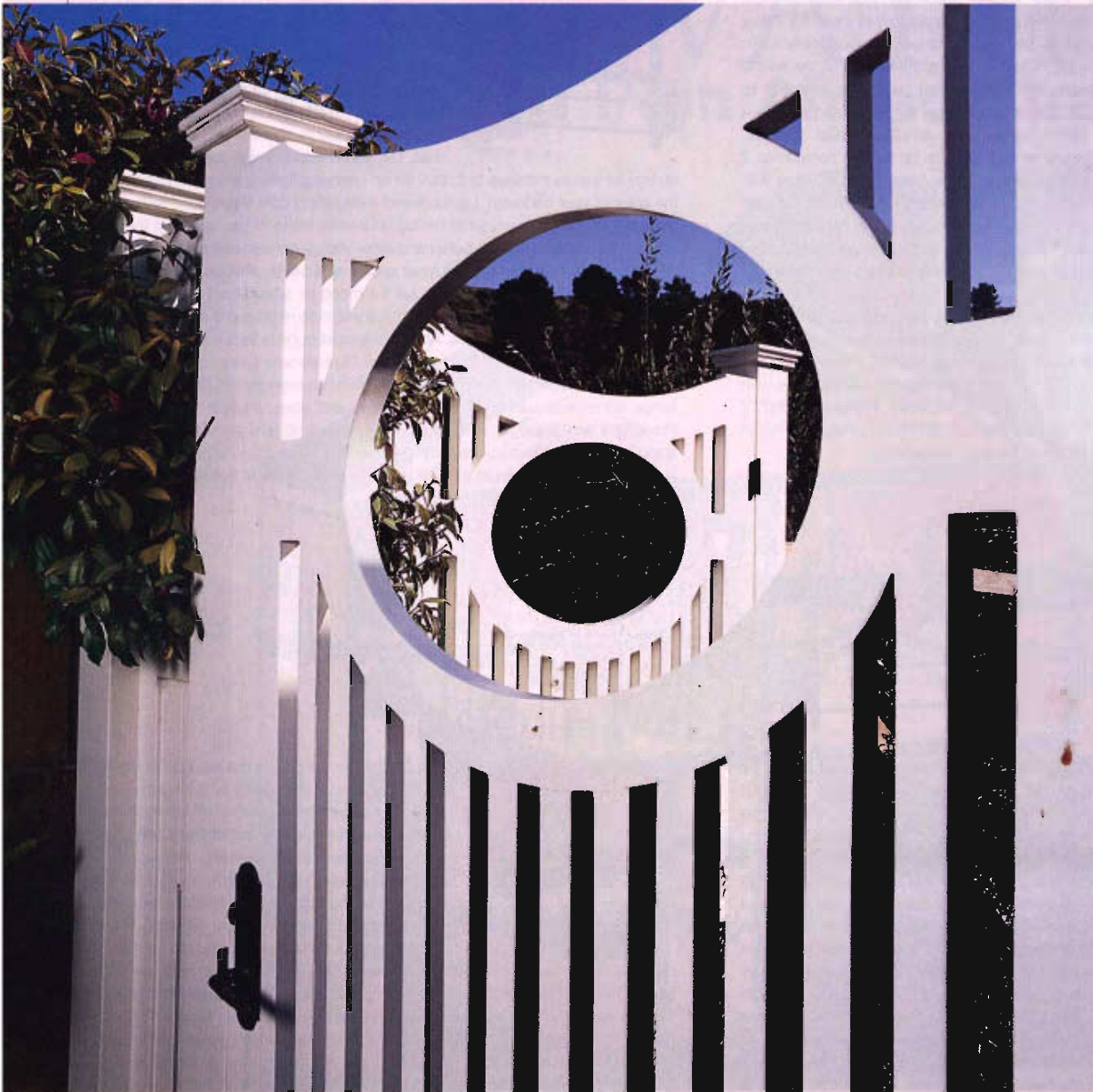
LAY A PERFECT PATIO

ADD A GARDEN GATE

BUILD A SIMPLE DECK

BEAT SUMMER DROUGHT





*A grace note in the garden, these cottage-style gates made of enduring western red cedar serve both a practical and a decorative purpose. Their sturdy stile-and-rail construction guarantees they won't sag.*

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hile garden gates can display a whimsical charm, putting one up properly is serious business. Just ask Rick and Paula Coven, who had to juggle issues of aesthetics and practicality when they added four entry gates around their hillside property overlooking San Francisco Bay. First and foremost, the homeowners wanted to create an inviting threshold between their gardens

## Garden Gate

A handsome entry hints at the beauty beyond

and the outside world. But the gates also had to keep wildlife from pillaging their prized roses and dahlias.

Finding a style that would meet their needs was the first step in the planning process. While low-slung, airy gates have a welcoming quality, they provide no real protection. High, solid-paneled gates, on the other hand, are secure but forbidding. Often, adjoining fence elements



*Different stile-and-rail entry gates greet visitors to these four gardens. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A painted double gate with a weave pattern adds a formal touch; an arched arbor encourages climbing vines; a green painted gate and fence allow a peek at the garden beyond; a gray stained wooden gate has an informal feel.*



provide useful design clues. A brick wall, for instance, will be better served by an ornate wrought-iron gate than by rustic split rails. In this case, landscape designer Bruce McCrea felt an elegant cottage-style gate would suit both the formal courtyard garden in front of the house and the vine-covered welded-wire

fencing that enclosed the lawn in back.

Custom-built by Charles Prowell (who collaborated with McCrea on the design), the wood gates stand 7½ feet tall, with a 1½-inch ground clearance—barrier enough to fend off the area's deer, raccoons, and other troublesome pests. But the open spindles and

elliptical centerpiece entice visitors with a glimpse of the garden beyond. And at 4 feet wide, each easily accommodates a wheelbarrow. The four gates are also in scale with their surroundings. "The strong, geometric design complements the lines of the Covens' handsome clapboard home," says Prowell.

Given the heavy use a gate must withstand—swinging open and shut thousands of times—sound construction is critical. Quality jobs start with a stable, decay-resistant material, such as redwood, cedar, or cypress. (Metal gates, though rust-prone, have the advantage of never rotting.) Prowell prefers clear western red cedar for its price, and treats it with a weatherproofing clear sealant or an oil-based semitransparent stain. His gates (more of Prowell's styles can be found on page 36) are stile-and-rail construction and typically hang on sturdy steel butt hinges, dipped in linseed oil and beeswax to prevent corrosion. "The gates are guaranteed never to sag," says Prowell, and so far none have.

Of course, that kind of quality assurance doesn't come cheap—Prowell's gates start at about \$800—but the homeowners feel the expense is justified. "We've worked hard to make our gardens inviting spaces in which to entertain friends and let our children play," says Rick Coven. "Since the gates provide a passage into that world, we wanted them to be built to last." ■



The identical gates help shape a quiet sanctuary where bluestone pathways lead to prize-winning roses.

GUARDING AGAINST GATE SAG



A **DIAGONAL CROSS BRACE** is one way to keep a gate square. It works by compression, transmitting gravity's downward pull to the most stable part of the gate—where the bottom hinge meets the post.



Alternatively, a **THREADED ROD AND TURNBUCKLE** running diagonally from the top hinge works by tension, pulling up the bottom corner, where sag would be most evident. This is a good fix for a gate that has started to droop.

If the gate is a garden's welcome gesture, a sagging one is equivalent to a limp handshake. Ensuring that a sturdy gate won't rack, or pull out of square, starts with a sound bracing system. Prowell's type of stile-and-rail construction with mortise-and-tenon joinery works best. Simply built box-frame gates, on the other hand, require a diagonal wood brace. In order to transmit the force of gravity to the strongest part of the gate, the brace (often a 2x4) must run from the top of the latch post to the bottom of the hinge post (top). A threaded rod or wire with turnbuckle is also effective, especially in rescuing gates that have already started to rack. Because the system works by tension instead of compression, the rod or wire runs in the opposite direction of a wood brace (above); tightening the turnbuckle pulls up the bottom, free-swinging corner.

A gate also needs a sturdy hinge post, with at least one third of its total length set in gravel topped with concrete. Flimsy hinges are another common cause of failure, so invest in heavy-duty hardware that's hot-dipped galvanized to resist rust. Strap hinges are often used on wider gates because their long plates help distribute the load. If the fasteners in your prepackaged kit are undersize, replace them with stainless steel screws that will anchor deep into the hinge post.