



# Garden Variety

**SIEGEL & STRAIN** Architects



What really drove custom builder Michael Muscardini to build a new house wasn't so much the need for more living space; he and his wife, Robyn, who is his partner in Oakland, Calif.-based Creative Spaces, are empty nesters. The real motivation was his desire for a bigger garden. After spending several decades in a Berkeley, Calif., bungalow on a small, urban lot, "I wanted a large landscape to play with," he says. "I wanted more room just to walk around." ■ Throughout the '90s that desire grew progressively stronger, so when a friend showed Muscardini a 8.5-acre Sonoma County site in 1998, he knew he'd arrived home. Before he even began to think about building a house, Muscardini planted a vineyard and began improving the soil for a big organic garden. Now he was ready

to put ideas collected over a 20-year career building architect-designed projects to work on his own dream home. ■ Creative Spaces had rebuilt many of the houses destroyed by the 1991 fire in the Oakland Hills, and Muscardini knew that the Sonoma site was equally vulnerable to wildfire. He wanted a defensible landscape plan and building materials that would



Reprinted from Custom Home Magazine - July/August 2002



dampen that risk. ■ His materials list included some bold choices. The basic building material is Rastra, blocks of 85 percent recycled Styrofoam encapsulated in concrete. When stuccoed on the outside and plastered on the inside, they create four-hour fire walls that will withstand a blaze up to 2,000 degrees F. A sprinkler system adds an extra measure of protection. ■ With an R-value of 28, the Rastra walls also mitigate daily temperature swings that can be as wide as 50 degrees. Another advantage of lightweight Rastra blocks was that Muscardini and his son, Giancarlo, were able to build the structure themselves. ■ The crowning glory of the

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courtyard home is a copper roof. It was one of the few luxuries the Muscardinis allowed themselves, and they paid for it, literally, with the kitchen cabinets. To offset the roof's cost, they chose IKEA cabinets for the kitchen and baths, figuring they could replace them later. The knock-down cabinets had to be assembled on site, but they cost less than \$7,000. ■ Muscardini faced two big challenges on this project. One was putting in all the infrastructure himself. Though he'd built many new homes and remodeled more, he'd never installed sewers, roads, electrical service, and water. The project was a lesson in land development. ■ The bigger challenge, however, was managing so many decisions. "I have a much deeper appreciation for what our clients go through," he says. One of the epiphanies he had was the realization that nearly all client decisions are "couple decisions," which doubles their difficulty. He and Robyn both worked hard to stay engaged in the decision-making process and to carve out time from running the company to visit showrooms. ■ The couple built their home during the busiest period their company has known. Oddly enough, Muscardini thinks this was an advantage. "We had so much work, we only had to think about production, not sales," he says. "Now things have slowed and it's gotten a little more cutthroat." Muscardini is thinking about marketing again, with an eye to expanding the business into Sonoma County. He's inviting local architects and

potential clients to see the house and is planning a fund-raising event for a local charity there. "It's fun," he says, "to share the house." Now the house that started with a garden promises to help his company plow new territory. —L.E.

Project Credits: Builder: Creative Spaces, Oakland, Calif.; Architect: Siegel & Strain, Emeryville, Calif.; Living space: 3,600 square feet; Site size: 8.5 acres; Construction cost: Withheld; Photographer: Mully Kibbey ■ Resources: Cabinets: IKEA, Circle 550; Concrete blocks: Basalite, Circle 551; Garage doors: Raynox, Circle 552; Hardware: Baldwin, Circle 553; Lighting fixtures: Halo, Circle 554; Oven: Wolf, Circle 555; Plumbing fittings/fixtures: Elkay, Circle 556; Grohe, Circle 557; and Kohler, Circle 558; Structural lumber: Trus Joist, Circle 559.

