



NEWS FROM HAVERFIELD PARK

FILLING IN FOR MARTHA

By Barbara Caswell



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Now that Ms. Stewart's too busy with her attorney to give us much advice these days, I guess I'll have to pinch hit for her. Not that she ever had much to do with we West Coasters. People used to say my job was similar to hers, and I used to laugh that we were just alike, except for our bank accounts. And also, I can't cook, but I'm willing let Nigella take over that part.

My contractor felt that this back entry was complete when he left, and he was justifiably proud of his work. He installed 8-foot tall doors with classic crosshead trims, clad on the exterior to resist weather problems, clay bricks with a few burnt clinkers blended in, everything sloped

to shed water away from the house. In other words, he did a really professional job on our three porches.

But there's always a catch: any woman can tell you that "home" has little to do with getting everything perfectly level, and everything to do with the heart. Whether it's a chick thing or a designer thing, even a back entry



Well built, yes. Inviting, no.



Even a rough PhotoShop job is good enough to help you decide what you want to install around an entry. You can work out your sizes and plant arrangements on your computer, before you spend a lot of time and money on materials.

deserves to be completed, and with this house, there's a matched pair.

All entries should be inviting in some way, to draw a person toward it. With before and after photos, I can dissect the physical details that lend a place some character and charm, so that people can walk right in and make themselves at home.

First of all, I cheated. By having the luxury of building from scratch, everything was already set up for what I had in mind. I already knew that each entry, even the back doors, would have a display of traditional clay pots with lush plants spilling down the steps, so the stoops were built extra wide to accommodate that, with drip systems to hook into at each corner of steps. Don't delude yourself into thinking that you'll keep clay pots watered adequately by hand every night after a day's work!

Nothing beats advance planning! No matter how charming, it's just a pain to have steps so crowded with plants that you can't walk up them safely – there just has to be enough room. This is a common error architects make: they proportion the steps to look correct on their drawings, not knowing that a homeowner may intend to add plant material later. It's your job to let your architect know what your landscaping intentions are.

In breezy Petaluma, potted plants dry out fast, so extra large pots are more successful. Container arrangements look most graceful and interesting with varying heights and shapes, perhaps with something in common, in this case, clay. Another good solution could be containers that were all architectural salvage items, or a collection of old cast iron, or clay vessels from a desert vacation, for example.



Stripped bare, you can see that these back doors and their stoops have unusual proportions. These doors are eight feet, taller than the typical 6 foot 8 inch doors but the same width, so it's necessary to adapt to these more imposing proportions.

If you are rebuilding a stoop or deck steps, don't deprive yourself of one of the luxuries you see on those grand estate tours: deep treads. Twelve inches may seem large

compared to interior steps, but you'll find that the best outdoor treads are a full 16 inches deep. This space will be needed for those larger pots, too. Everybody has their own tastes; my favorite are steps that get wider as they descend.

The height of these doors requires some tall plant material around them to provide a frame. Rigid symmetry is very confining, so here there is just a loose balance of the sizes. These doors are a pair, and so there are dominant elements of four tall, shade-loving plants in vertical pots, matched up. I like the shape of tumbling water cascading down stones, repeated in trailing plants. Incidentally, if bees bother you, you can avoid flowers and stick to greenery. It's fun to keep some potted herbs near your kitchen door. Even if you're a lightweight in the kitchen like me, when friends come over to cook outside, there'll be someone in the group who knows what to snip off and add to the food.

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You'll have to use some imagination in setting the position of your containers, because they should be empty when you first set them out. Why? First of all you'll find them easy to move, and secondly, you may be surprised to find that spots you believed required sun-loving plants are actually shaded by your eaves nearly all day long. Because it takes a full year for a long-lasting container plant to look luscious, I always plant them with an annual in the same container. As the permanent plant matures, it gradually takes over.

Every garden shop carries adorable clay pot feet, but I find them a little busy looking. I do space my pots up off brick stoops and porches however, both for better drainage and to prevent large permanent stains on the brick. I just use short pieces of light wood, which are so thin that the pot appears to be resting on the brick. And speaking of brick, there are plenty of other beautiful surfaces for porches and stoops, but brick is my all-time favorite. For once, I don't have a reason, and you don't need one either, when you choose your favorite!