



"I strive for a collected look," says Suzanne Tucker. Organic elements weave throughout accessories atop a Madagascar-stone coffee table, textiles on a Jean-Michel Frank sofa, and a tree-trunk table by San Francisco artist Andrew Fisher. Olive trees frame a spectacular view.



suzanne tucker

This San Francisco designer channels a lifelong love of gardens into inviting rooms where nature and flowers are always welcome guests

By KAREN CARROLL

flower: As this is our gardening issue, we'd love to begin with your early experiences with gardens. **SUZANNE TUCKER:** I had a really charmed childhood in Santa Barbara, California, enveloped in gardens and nature. My mother is English, and thus seemed to have the genetics for horticulture and flower arranging. I grew up on 14 acres, and we had very formal gardens and then much of the property was wild. My sister and I would spend all day playing in the fields and climbing trees. Right next door was Lotusland, which is now a public garden, but then was still owned by Ganna Walska, a Polish opera singer. We'd explore her grounds (no fences), and it was such a fantasy world. One day the formidable Madame Walska appeared and said not to touch or move any of the rocks. Of course I didn't care about the rocks—I was interested in the frogs. But she told us to go home, and as we

were brought up rather strictly, we curtsied and scampered away. Afterward, she told my mother we were the most polite children she'd ever come across. I still take pride in being a polite trespasser! Although I took it for granted that we had the run of beautiful gardens, it influenced my outlook, and definitely infuses my sensibility as an interior designer today.

It sounds like you could have just as naturally grown up to be a landscape designer. Well I am forever dragging landscape designers *inside* the house and saying, "Now I want you to stand at this window and look out to the garden. This is what the clients will be living with, and let's face it, more time is spent viewing the garden from the inside." I'll give them cuttings of all my schemes so they'll know what colors in a room look out to what part of the garden, so nothing jars and it's a seamless transition.

You were a protégée of the legendary designer Michael Taylor, who is credited with creating the "California look." What are some of the lessons you learned from him? Before I began working with Michael, everything I had seen of his in magazines was about all-white, stone surfaces, and trees. But what I learned was what didn't necessarily turn up on his magazine covers—he was brilliant with blending antiquities with contemporary pieces, and he understood and loved textiles,

“Having that bit of freshness in my daily life is really important, whether I’m clipping a few camellias from the garden or bringing them home from the market.”

—SUZANNE TUCKER

textures, and color. California style is really about openness, embracing the outdoors, letting in light, and not having rooms that are closed down. Bringing in plant material such as trees is a big part of it. Michael wasn’t the first one to do that—the Victorians used palms in every corner—but it’s a way to create scale in a room that can be quite breathtaking and dramatic.

How would you describe your own design style? I think I’ve reacted against having a signature style because I never want to be pigeonholed. I will say that when people describe my work, the words “comfortable elegance” are often used. I believe you don’t want someone to stand at the door and say, “Oh, this is the most beautiful room.” You want people to walk into the middle of your living room and say that. People should be drawn in and feel as if they can kick off their shoes and curl their feet up on the sofa. That’s living in a house.



ABOVE: Tucker paper-backed a floral linen of her own design, *Hatley*, to use as the wallcovering in a bedroom. The bed (reflected in a faux coral mirror) was designed by Michael Taylor. LEFT: “I believe no matter the climate, a garden should always infuse the interior,” says Tucker. She looks for natural landing spots for plant materials, such as a mantel that she anchors with dogwood branches.

TOP: PHOTO BY GREY CRAWFORD; LEFT: PHOTO BY MATTHEW MILLMAN

The Venetian plaster walls and drapery fabric of this dining room were selected to match the homeowner's favorite lipstick shade. Kangaroo paw branches arranged in blue-and-white porcelain appear almost sculpture like, although the sculpture by renowned artist John Chamberlain commands its own serious attention.



Suzanne's Floral Favorites

FLOWER: Peony. I'm drawn to their lushness and complexity. They have been depicted in decorative arts for centuries, so there's a lovely conversation about peonies that goes back a long time.

GARDEN DESIGNER: Russell Page. I appreciate the way he used plant material as architecture, and there was an inherent big-scale serenity about his gardens.

PUBLIC GARDEN: Lotusland, of course! I like public gardens that were once private—you feel the soul of a garden that's designed that way. (www.lotusland.org)

FLORAL DESIGNER: My absolute go-to in San Francisco is Flowers Claire Marie. She is brilliant, and I've worked with her for probably 30 years. I also love Bloomers, because you can go into the shop and they have buckets filled with the most glorious specimens of the day. The owner, Patric, is divine, and if I'm there on a Friday at the right time, he has a bottle of champagne open, which is always fun. The third is Thierry Chantrel, whose accent alone will make you weak at the knees. He has that French sense of fantasy and drama. (www.flowersclairemarie.com, www.bloomerssf.com, www.thierrychantrel.com)

BOOK: I'm a big fan of what my friend Carolyne Roehm is doing with her own talented photographic skills. I want to jump into her *Flowers* book (Potter Style, 2012) when I open the pages.

I strive for a collected look, rather than all one period or style. We're not one-dimensional, and rooms should reflect as much. It's all about the point and counterpoint that makes things interesting.

You also design a beautiful line of fabrics, and we notice a number of pretty florals. Which one is your favorite? That's too difficult a choice, but I will tell you a favorite story. I had a document of an English floral from the 18th century, and it was one of the first pieces I adapted for the line. Shortly before I launched the collection, I brought home about 10 fabrics to my daughter and asked her to pick her favorite, which turned out to be that floral print. I named it *Hatley* after her, and it became not only my first order, but also the best seller ever since. One day I was out and about and got a phone call from my office, and they said, "You're not going to believe who just ordered the espresso colorway of

Hatley. ...Albert Hadley." If that wasn't the best validation, I'm not sure what is.

Finally, what are your tricks of the trade for incorporating fresh flowers in your house? I consider the natural landing spots. I don't want flowers everywhere or it's either going to look like someone died or a hothouse. I'm strategic. But having that bit of freshness in my daily life is really important, whether I'm clipping a few camellias from the garden or bringing them home from the market. I have an orchid collection that I've cultivated for 30 years. They bloom and then I send them off to a "boarding house," where they're repotted or split, and kept in the proper environment until they bloom again. They're like children who keep coming and going. Some of the exotic ones will bloom only once a year, and when they return, I think, *My goodness, I haven't seen you for a long while, and look how fabulous you've grown.* 🌸