

# Designing Nature

C.L. Williams and Gary Villagran's one-of-a-kind artful gardens are built to last a lifetime. **BY Allison Malafronte**

One of a garden designer's goals is to develop a new outdoor habitat—one that not only functions in harmony with nature but also serves as a visual sanctuary in line with a client's vision. It requires an aptitude in art and design, as well as an in-depth understanding of horticulture, ecological and environmental sustainability, and climate change.

C.L. Williams, Gary Villagran and the team at CIEL Design for Gardens have more than 20 years of experience creating thriving outdoor environments. In addition to excelling at formal design, they specialize in creating a sense of contentment, beauty and vitality through carefully cultivated surroundings. According to Williams, the founder and president of CIEL, their job is to design



**WILD MOTHER NATURE**  
This cylindrical space is energized by a series of sparkling water cascades. The surrounding formal gardens reinforce the wild nature of water and stone.

“Smooth lawn-covered terra forms lift sculptures by Charles Umlauf above a textured ribbon of fragrant Mexican tarragon.”

—C.L. WILLIAMS



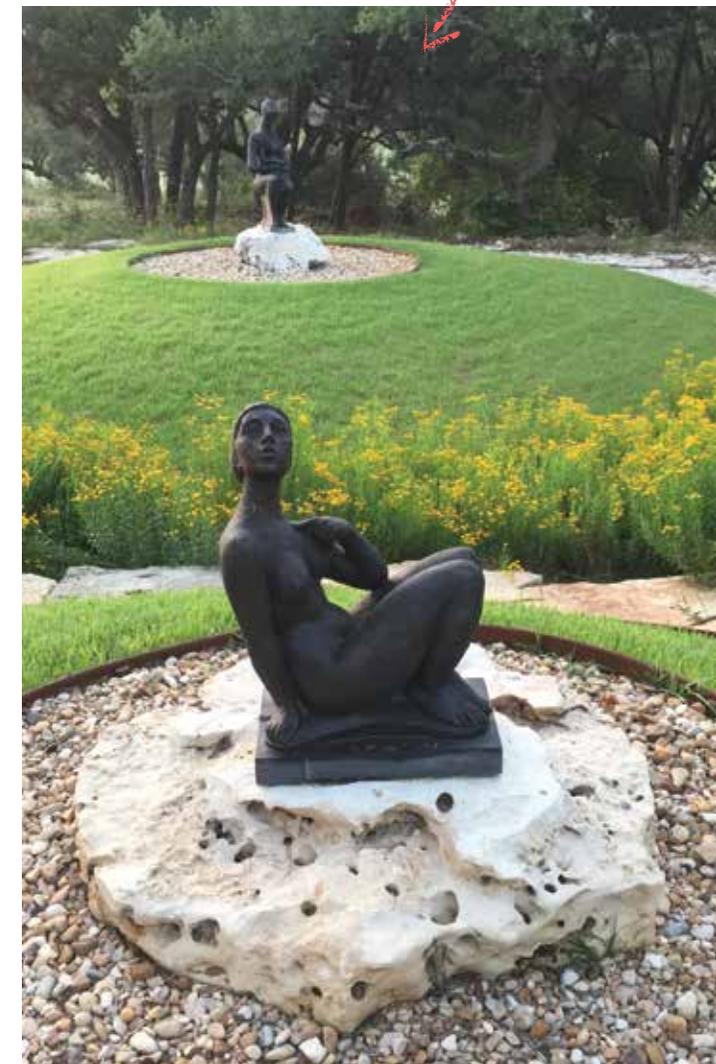
**HISTORICAL RELEVANCE**  
Deep green topiaries ripple and role around static rounds of silver succulents. These high-energy topiaries are a modern statement of an ancient art form invented by the Romans.

**LESS IS MORE**  
This pocket garden is designed for a silver palm, which rises up from a clustering base of silver cenizo topiaries.

beautiful gardens that promote a feeling of belonging and enjoyment of the land, nature and plant life. “That feeling is called a sense of place,” says Williams. “A garden with a sense of place is emotive, belongs with its environment and has a style unique to itself—it makes you feel as if it were always there.”

Growing up in Savannah, Georgia, Williams frequented nearby Sea Island, instilling his love for the outdoors and gardens at a young age. He went on to earn his Bachelor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Georgia, a Master of Landscape Architecture at Harvard University and an M.B.A. at the University of Texas at Austin. After several years in the business world and a season as a professional painter, Williams returned to his roots and launched CIEL, a company that approaches landscape architecture and design with the perspective and purpose of an artist. Because of his natural tendencies in fine art, he uses the phrase “Gardens as Art” to categorize his projects and refers to his relationship with nature and design as “artistic plantsmanship.”

Williams defines a CIEL garden as a collection of plants composed to form a space that is seated in its life-giving habitat. “Garden and habitat are created and managed so we may experience living beauty as it changes through a day, through seasons, through years,” he says. This is one





## YEAR-ROUND BEAUTY

**LEFT:** The ledge stone floating above the pool holds flowers in the summer. On cold winter nights, it holds fire to light up the space. **BELOW:** A true parterre, this is a modern statement of another ancient art form. Designed to be seen from above, it swirls and glistens to show the textures and forms of this community of Xeric plants.



## HORIZON VIEWS

The pool plateau stretches toward the West and the setting sun. The pool, deck, and tree canopy are designed to flow with this gesture.

of the most important aspects of garden design: understanding the life and ecosystems beneath the surface and anticipating how those elements will evolve, mature or change over time.

Williams and his team are able to visualize what a garden will look five years or two decades from now, and they problem solve, plan and build their prototypes accordingly. “A lot of forethought is required in this

type of design,” he says. “The growth of trees, for instance, alters the habitat. If you know the shade is going to expand, you have to design shade-tolerant plants in the current shade zone that will expand out with the growing shade. As a tree grows, it also consumes more water, so you have to design a flexible drip-irrigation system to produce more water.” In the best instances, the client’s vision fits seamlessly within the habitat. Williams says that the better and more natural the fit, the stronger the feeling that a particular place is uniquely beautiful and unlike any other.

A great example of this—and one of Williams’ favorite projects to date—is the Star Canyon Ranch, which he and his team designed for a client in the Texas Hill Country. Here, the ranch house, pool terrace, outdoor sculpture and other architectural elements work in tandem with the design, its sur-



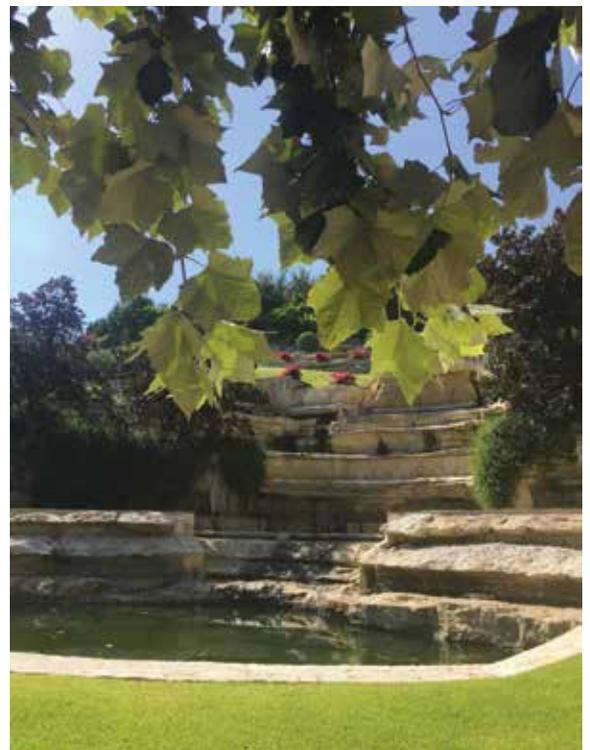
“Lawns are woven into the woods to create a lovely sweep of wild nature up into the gardens.”

—C.L. WILLIAMS

rounding environment and ecosystem. “There’s a seamless flow from the wild hill country to nearly-wild wildflower meadows to very modern gardens in courtyards, and then back out to nearly-wild,” Williams explains. “It’s all on an east-west axis, so the sun and shadows are powerful year-round. The fit between the design and the ecosystem has evolved over 20 years to create a strong sense of place.”

With words and phrases such as “light and shadow,” “sense of place,” “scale,” “harmony” and “beauty” regularly used in the CIEL vocabulary, it’s easy to see how the principles of fine art define their garden design. The planning process and maintenance are time- and labor-intensive—not only from the landscape architects and designers but also from experts ranging from stonemasons and interior designers to civil engineers and ecologists. Despite this, at the end of the day, each resulting environment looks and feels effortless and organic. Just as nature intended. ‘

*Allison Malafronte is an arts and design writer, editor and curator based in the greater New York area.*



#### CONTRAST AND HARMONY

Massive stone ledges are carved out of an existing arroyo to contain a water cascade. The elegant and formal man-made pools, fitted into the wild stone ledges, create contrast and harmony in the space.

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