

Blue and Weeping

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It was love at first sight; the Atlas cedar (*Cedrus atlantica*) and I go way back. I vividly remember when I first saw this tree as a child, probably about 1962, because three had just been planted on a lovely estate, Elmcourt, on Belleview Avenue. in Newport, RI (I grew up in Newport). Although many of the grand old estates in Newport had magnificent trees, I had never seen this icy blue conifer before, and there were no old ones that I knew about. I was so taken by its distinctive color and look, I eventually convinced my dad, Raymond, to plant one on our humble - though lovely- suburban yard. The last I saw, that one had become a magnificent tree. I was always proud of that tree since I had learned my love and enthusiasm for plants and the techniques of gardening from my late dad, yet he had listened to my advice. I don't recall when I first saw the weeping or pendulous variety, 'Glauca Pendulum', but I'm sure it only increased my appreciation of this magnificent conifer. And although it was rare when I was a child, it has become quite widespread in temperate climate horticulture since then. I have always had a weakness for pendulous or "weeping" plants, coniferous or otherwise. Again, as a child, my favorite plant in Newport was the magnificent weeping European beech (*Fagus sylvatica* 'Pendula') so common on the large estates. But it could be a hemlock (*Tsuga*), mulberry (*Morus*) or elm (*Ulmus*); if it weeped, I loved it. I think, as a child, the space created underneath these pendulous plants was special - as adults seldom thought it worth going there, yet it was like a secret space that I could enjoy. I've tried since, to mimic this "space within a space" concept in many landscapes Planet Horticulture (www.planethorticulture.com) has created.



A lovely old farmhouse in Western Sonoma County, CA. In front of the house is a raised terrace, separating the house from the driveway, but the terrace and house were largely exposed to the frequent "traffic" on the driveway. We had the fortune of working for a

wonderful couple who own a 6 acre parcel in Graton Valley, part of the greater Russian River drainage, located in a very scenic part of Sonoma County between the small towns of Graton and Occidental. (Some of you may be familiar with Occidental as it was closest town to the famous Western Hills Nursery (www.westernhillsnursery.com), founded by the late Lester Hawkins and Marshall Olbrich. The garden serves as an inspiration for generations of horticultural enthusiasts).



The yard presented many interesting design challenges, many which I'll discuss in future blogs, but linking disparate spaces and structures, and providing more privacy were two crucial issues with the clients. The elevated terrace on the S side of the house was previously planted with blocks of lavender (*Lavandula*) and the so-called lavender cotton, (*Santolina*) (see first photo.) Using lavender in big planting blocks became popular in California about 2 decades ago, and seems to have become *de rigeur* in estate-type plantings. Our clients gave the nod to our suggestions to move on to a new layout and plant palette. The clients wanted to spend more time on this sunny front yard terrace, especially in the winter months, but there was no privacy from the driveway. It was frustrating for them to be in such a remote location, yet feel like they were visible to anyone driving in. Even with rural properties, screening and privacy are a primary concern.



The solution came while I was visiting Sweet Lane Nursery (www.sweetlanenursery.com) E of Petaluma. This nursery specializes in specimen plants. Generally in Planet Horticulture designs, we prefer to use 30 or 40 moderately sized plants, to one large specimen. This permits the clients to have greater diversity with a moderate budget, as specimen sized plants, while more immediate in effect, are typically high priced. Because of my love of the Atlas cedar, particularly the weeping variety, when I saw the above specimen I took some pictures, as I wanted to show Dave this gorgeous specimen. I remember thinking, "It would be so wonderful to use a plant like this in one of our gardens" as the "value" of specimen plants is that you can get age without waiting; this plant is estimated to be 70 years old. Whoever started this, obviously never lived to enjoy its current beauty.



What I also like about this is that it hadn't been trained into the "S" curve trunk that seems to be standard in the nursery trade today - why I've never been sure as it gets tiresome to see such a plastic and variable shaped plant trained into some boring cliché. This specimen had

been grafted onto a vertical trunk at about 5' tall, thus formed a lovely, irregular umbrella effect, longer than wide, thus also had potential as a living curtain.



As you probably guessed, Dave sent some pictures of the plant in the nursery to our client, and they loved it and decided to "splurge", since it seemed to fit the aesthetic of their 19th century farmhouse look, and would screen off a large stretch of the terrace from the driveway immediately. In the above picture the previously boxed specimen had been placed at the top of the terrace wall. Instead of planting it in a hole in the ground, we decide to add greater height to the screening effect by building a mound around the root mass, thus gaining another 3' or more. It also meant that the trailing branches could be left on the plant rather than trimmed up which would have been necessary if planted at ground level.



Another picture from within the terrace showing the root mass set at soil level before the mound was created. You will also note from the picture that we had replaced the block of

lavenders with a naturalistic planting. With paths and seating areas carved out, the area became a stroll garden with hang-out spaces rather than some simple pattern to be looked at from a distance.



Looking N toward the house from a meadow on the other side of the drive. Note how perfectly this weeping blue Atlas cedar fits the scale of the house, as if some foresightful early resident had planted it decades ago. Although there are still some evident gaps in the screening, these have been planted with a variety of screening shrubs of smaller size, chosen mostly to play off of the sculptural and colorful cedar.



Looking toward the weeping Atlas cedar from the sitting area nearby. Here you can see the mound planted with a mosaic of low herbaceous plants that can tolerate the shadowy understory. The elevation of the mound also reinforces the enclosing aspect of the tree. The beautiful foliage of the lotus banana (*Musella lasiocarpa*) is on the left. (More on that

remarkable hardy plant in a future blog.) The front yard terrace is now a pleasantly private space, part garden, part living area. Making spaces of any size more usable by the folks who own them is one of Planet Horticulture's favorite achievements.

This garden has been an exciting and fun project to work on and this landscape will become one of the great gardens of Sonoma County as it matures.