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Fall decorating

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Growing Modern

Designer Sean Quigley brings a rustic, organic character to contemporary landscapes.

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Potted jade plants and boxwoods temper the lines and angles around this elevated deck.

For 20 years, Sean Quigley’s San Francisco garden and curiosities shop, Paxton Gate, has delighted visitors with its eclectic mix of old and new, conventional and surprising. His garden designs do the same.

They’re clean and contemporary, to be sure. In fact, Sean often starts with a bold geometric framework—“a spreadsheet,” he calls it. But to avoid the sterile look and feel that often defines contemporary designs, he includes elements that have an organic character. “Rustic, aged components bring life into a design and humanize the garden,” Sean says. “Lush plantings soften the hard lines.”

For example, in this garden, his spreadsheet is a striking geometric patchwork of natural hardscape materials, such as gravel, mulch, bluestone, and river rock. He softened

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For example, in this garden, his spreadsheet is a striking geometric patchwork of natural hardscape materials, such as gravel, mulch, bluestone, and river rock. He softened them by filling some of the squares on the "floor" of the garden room with plants, and then lining the perimeter of the garden with bamboo. Its dense, lush foliage makes it a great screening plant, concealing a not-so-pretty privacy fence, while its distinct structure adds to the contemporary feel. Likewise, Sean chose a privet hedge to form a living separation. The tightly clipped shape reinforces the geometric theme while adding life to the garden. Inanimate materials, such as furniture and decor, are chosen for their organic vibe.

For someone who begins with such an orderly foundation, Sean describes his approach as surprisingly instinctive. "It comes from a place I'm not really conscious of," he says. "Really, what I try to do is make things look good and make a space function well." Conscious or not, it's a mix that works magic.



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Hip to be square

Here are three easy ways to add some modern geometry to your garden spaces.

1 Use edging or boards to create squares, as Sean did, *left*. Grow small, compact plants and line them up in rows to reinforce the structured look.

2 Lay out patio surfaces and pathways in grids, using gravel or paver surfaces. Extend gridded pathways into lawns by placing square pavers in the grass.

3 For unity, echo the rectangular theme throughout the garden with such elements as square stools, tables, or containers. But remember to balance these with softer shapes and plantings.

Easy-care plants, such as succulents, are central to Sean's designs. "People are busy," he says. "Low maintenance is key."



Gallery: An Inviting Modern Garden



A privet hedge and a purple Japanese maple separate a dining space (foreground) from a lounging area.



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