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# THE AGENCY

PERSPECTIVES ON LIFE AND LUXURY

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*Summer*

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The pool at Six Senses Kaplankaya  
Photograph by JOHN ATHIMARITIS



# It's What's *Outside* That Counts

Inner Gardens founder Stephen Block knows the value of exterior design. **By Dan Howarth**



STEPHEN BLOCK

When celebrated landscape designer Stephen Block founded Los Angeles-based Inner Gardens in 1990, he brought together his two great loves: plants and antiques. Now, he and his team design, install, and maintain gardens for both commercial and residential properties, including \$200 million homes; and for his company's shop, he has amassed one of the industry's most extensive collections of outdoor accessories. Here, he talks about the company he has cultivated.

## What were the early days of your business like?

After seven years in commercial real estate, one day I just decided that I wanted to go back to my first love: plants. I knew a lot of building owners, so my first project was maintaining the plants in a 400,000-square-foot commercial building. After that, it was all word of mouth. I also started collecting odd and unusual plants and containers. I would pull things out of the

L.A. River, like a crumpled pink can, find a really weird plant to put in it, and sell them in seconds. Eventually, I found a greenhouse in Culver City where I could store the collection I was amassing from flea markets and antique stores. Ultimately, I'm a treasure hunter.

## How have attitudes to outdoor space changed during your career?

The exterior has become a very important part of one's home, and indoor-outdoor living has become very big. Interior designers saw the opportunity to treat outdoor spaces like another room, with sofas, chairs, firepits, etcetera. And they realized that they needed someone like me to help them execute that.

## What value do you bring to each of your exterior design projects?

I'm trained in horticulture, the art of growing plants, so I design from that perspective. But oftentimes I'll start out with a bench or a fountain, since I have such a large inventory of antiques. Scale is super important—I find that most people underscale their plants and trees—and quality is, too. Our gardens are full and rich from day one, rather than needing to grow in for three or five years. Our clients don't want to see dirt.

## You've been everywhere sourcing art for the garden. What are some of your most spectacular finds?

One of the pieces that I recently sourced in Italy and just placed at a client's home is a beautiful \$45,000, 18th-century statue of Minerva on a 19th-century stand. It's a bust fragment, which fits into my wabi-sabi propensity—it has to be missing at least one of its extremities. I previously sourced a 4-foot Chinese marble seated Buddha from an estate in Newport, Rhode Island, which was beautifully worn, serene, quiet, and substantial. I sold it to a very significant collector in Montecito for around \$35,000. And the highest sale I ever made was \$85,000. That was quite a long time ago, so that figure would probably be much [higher] today because prices have climbed due to scarcity and demand in the garden category. People collect these pieces and hold on to them like they do Birkin bags.

