

Designer Profile

Greg Boyer—Hawaiian Landscapes

Exotic “Dreamscapes” are Inspired by
the Artist’s Personal and Cultural Odysseys



By Marcus Webb

GREG BOYER, ASLA, BEGAN HIS CAREER as a Hawaiian landscape architect with one pick, one shovel, one rake—and no clients. Today, his work graces Island homes of such celebrities as singer/actress Bette Midler; television producer Steven Bochco; film composer Mike Post; and CEOs of Fortune 500 corporations.

Boyer provides his clients with lush landscaping... man-made miniature backyard islands... tranquil Japanese sand gardens... ancient Balinese-style jungle artifacts... and a host of other spectacular environmental delights.

Greg Boyer is a dealer in dreamscapes.

“Dreams,” in fact, is a word that comes up often in Boyer’s conversation. At one moment, he says of his younger self: *“I wasn’t afraid to dream or use my imagination.”* Later, he describes his working methods: *“I use my creativity to dream and blend Hawaii’s diverse cultural, geographical, and floral elements together, integrating them for people who appreciate this marvelous, rich heritage.”* Finally, Boyer voices his personal artistic credo: *“My attempt is to create my clients’ gardens of their dreams.”*

Boyer earned his masters’ degree in landscape architecture from the University of Michigan. But after taking his diploma, he took a highly circuitous route from Ann Arbor to O’ahu. He first spent years meandering through Mexico and Costa Rica, followed by a trip through Europe, down to Greece, the Mediterranean isles, then Turkey, and finally overland to India (where he sketched the Taj Mahal). “I guess I had really gotten the travel bug, probably as a way to view different garden styles,” he muses today. “It changed me forever.”

In 1973 a former classmate invited Boyer to Hawai’i. “I discovered endless summer!” he recalls with still-fresh delight. “After a lifetime of ice and snow, it was amazing to realize you



Greg and Lynn Boyer have worked together for 19 years. They met when he was an instructor at the University of Hawai’i; she was one of his students.

LEFT: A stone head in temple in Cambodia, drawn by Boyer on site in 2003.

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ABOVE: The large, monolithic head with water flowing from between the hands was created by artisans in Bali from a design by Greg Boyer, and was specifically conceived for this spot in the Boyers' personal garden.

could enjoy summer year-round.”

But Boyer's odyssey wasn't over yet. He worked in a landscape design office for six months, supported himself as a carpenter for two years, and finally launched his own one-man landscaping firm. Eventually his success led him to an eight-year teaching stint at the University of Hawai'i, where he met his wife Lynn. Today they run Greg Boyer—Hawaiian Landscapes Inc. from a nine-acre nursery in Kaneohe and from their home offices

in a 6,000 sq. ft., self-designed custom residence on the windward side of O'ahu, in Kaha'u'u.

Every 18 months, the Boyers make yet another odyssey to the Far East, acquiring plants, artifacts, and artworks that will supply the nursery and—often—find their way into his custom designs. Boyer says it's all part of his personal synthesis of the art and culture of the Islands.

“For me, Hawaiian style is made up of all the wonderful things that are here,” Boyer explains. “These elements range from the original Polynesian culture and indigenous plants, to imported plants and foliage, as well as the wonderful Asian influences.

“I've lived here in Polynesia for over 30 years now,” he continues. “I have been collecting plants, rocks, and stones from the Islands the entire time, while the Asian influence comes from things I see, respect, and love in that part of the world—pots, statues, bowls, stone carvings, fabrics and artifacts. It gives me great joy to reflect all of those combinations, to give back to Hawai'i what Hawai'i has given me.”

Additional influences on Boyer's work range from Richard Tongg, whom Boyer calls “the first real landscape architect in Hawai'i,” to Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx. Building architects Hamlet “Lucky” Bennett and Frank Lloyd Wright have also shaped his approach.

According to Boyer, his signature style combines the University of Michigan's “problem-solving” approach; Roberto Marx's bold way of “painting” landscapes with “large washes of color, all in large masses of plants”; and Tongg's systematic knowledge of site conditions and ecosystems. Yet if there is a distinctive Boyer style, it could be defined as enchanting yet understated elegance, leading to a dreamscape-turned-reality.

“In your early years you get excited about using every plant you can imagine,” Boyer concedes. “In my mature work there are a few well-chosen plant types that do what is needed such as blocking neighbors' views, providing shade, and allowing the distant views to carry the day. I focus on the natural beauty of the site. Simplicity of design allows this beauty to come through.”

Perhaps “seeming” simplicity of design is closer to the mark. Boyer's work offers the carefully “artless” sort of art that

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TOP: This landscaped backyard for a deluxe custom home at Maunakea on the Big Island features an infinity pool, a quartzite terrace, and a golf course overlook. The Maunakea Beach Hotel stands on the horizon.

ABOVE: Outdoor shower at left is situated amidst a bathroom garden.

impresses, precisely by *not* calling undue attention to itself. Yet its details, planning, good taste—and above all, its total effect of “fantasy-scape”—reveal a highly sophisticated mind at work.

Highlights of Boyer’s recent portfolio include his deft landscaping for the Bochcos’ custom home on the Big Island. Lush foliage and graceful palm trees are deployed with restraint throughout the expansive green lawn of the backyard, complementing (yet carefully not over-

whelming) the moat and twin “island”-based outdoor pavilions.

Boyer’s personal favorite among his creations? The Balinese garden in his own backyard. “It is the first garden we’ve designed without compromise,” he says proudly. “Our Balinese garden represents a range of talents and skills that, to date, no other single project has offered the scope for us to fully deploy.”

Boyer, an artist whose work is so deeply rooted in dreams, found the perfect partner in Lynn, who dreamed up a proprietary computer software program for their company. The program enables the pair to translate Greg’s conceptual visions into precise CAD blueprints, right down to onscreen icons that symbolize each individual type and unit of plant that will go into a landscape design.

“We are now executing our design drawings 100% by computer,” says Boyer. “The advantages are that all the symbols are in color so it’s easier for contractors to bid and build, and the field workers can get a color plan and can read it to fully understand the garden all the way down to our color scheme.”

Teamwork is also key value for Boyer in his working relationships with home owners, architects, and contractors. “When designing any project, I have always started by trying to get my clients to tell me their ideas,” he says. “I ask what they want to accomplish. What are their favorite colors, their favorite plants? Since I specialize in residential design, I try to get both the husband’s and the wife’s design ideas. My attempt is to create the garden of their dreams, not another garden for me. I really try to keep my ego in check.”

One-of-a-kind custom residences, including a series of top-end residential projects on Kona, have kept Greg and Lynn Boyer busy in recent years. Some commercial clients, such as the Pinn Brothers developing team, not only commission Boyer landscapes for their development projects; they also live amidst “Boyer-scapes” in their personal residences. The ultimate compliment, says Boyer, comes at the end of a job when a client says: “You have realized my dream so completely that I no longer consider you my contractor. You are my friend.”

In the words of the classic song, Greg Boyer has not been afraid to “dream on...dream until your dreams come true.” 🌸