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## CALIFORNIA LOVE

**Story:** Stephanie Maxwell Newton | **Photography:** Rett Peek

*Inspired by his home state, landscape designer Chris H. Olsen gives an iconic North Little Rock home a much-needed exterior update*

**Everyone has that list of qualities that would make their house a dream home.** Chris H. Olsen, owner of Botanica in Little Rock and Plantopia in North Little Rock, stumbled into his dream home by accident, and it didn't take long to realize it had everything he'd ever wanted in a house.

"I loved my house in west Little Rock, but I was outgrowing it," Olsen recalls. "One Sunday I was driving through

Park Hill, and I pulled over when I passed this house. It was falling apart. Some of the windows were rotted with no glass, but it was still beautiful.”

After talking to several neighbors—one of whom had a key and urged him to have a look inside—he pieced together the home’s storied history: The Justin Matthews, Jr. House, as it’s called, was designed by architect Max Mayer and built in 1927 by Justin Matthews, a local builder and real estate developer, for his son. It was meant to be the first of many homes of this grandeur in an area of Park Hill called Edgemont, however once the Depression hit, growth stalled.

Olsen immediately saw through the home’s rotted windows, flooded basement, and general disrepair to envision lots of greenery, lively garden parties, and the Spanish Colonial house of his dreams. “I’m from San Diego, and I always wanted a Spanish house that was U-shaped with an inner courtyard,” Olsen says. “It was built for me.”

## **BACK TO LIFE**

First things first, Olsen had to repair decades of damage to the exterior of the house (see below). He had all of the windows rebuilt and the walls re-stuccoed while following guidelines to keep the house on the National Register of Historic Places—after all, the home’s architectural arches, stucco walls, terracotta tiles, and wrought iron grillwork are what make it so classically Spanish Colonial. Olsen also traded the property’s unkempt lawn for a newly sodded rendition, which took 32 pallets of sod to cover.

## **LIGHT THE WAY**

All the lanterns around the exterior of the home are replicas of an original that was found buried under layers of concrete outside the home. “I salvaged the original and had it repaired, and now it’s a lamp in my entryway,” Olsen says. To bring the exterior walls of the home to life, Olsen created built-in planter boxes along the top. Supertunias surrounding the entrance create the impression of a living wall.

## **GARDEN HIDEAWAY**

To the right of the home’s entrance is a fountain and reflection garden featuring red banana plants, blue switch grass, wintergreen boxwoods, Iresines, Chinese fan palms, purple oxalis, and a variety of roses along a crushed-granite pathway. Tall lanterns are replicas of the lights adorning the house, while plants of varying heights provide privacy, making the garden a true retreat from the world. “You get kind of hidden in there,” Olsen says.

## **THE ART OF MIXING IT UP**

As far as containers go, Olsen swears that bigger is better and more is more. “I have a word called ‘jhemajang’—it’s also a line of plants and furniture I have,” he explains. “It’s just a word I started using; it’s the art of mixing it up. When I do my containers, I use all different kinds of plants with different textures and colors—things you wouldn’t normally see together.”

## **COOL & COLLECTED**

In addition to filling his planters to the brim, Olsen makes a visual impact by grouping multiples together. Some of his accessories, like the ones seen here, have been collected over time: The angel was another found object when Olsen acquired the home (“She’s a guardian angel for the house,” he says), and the cluster of Indonesian figures were sent to him from a friend in Bali.

## **SINGING THE BLUES**

Bright blue doors, chair cushions, and planters give the inner courtyard a coastal vibe inspired by Olsen’s California roots. “One of my favorite places is near Palm Springs called La Quinta Resort and Club, and they have blue doors,” he explains. “I just love blue—and blue just goes with the house.” Iron doors on the ground floor lead to a solarium that opens up into a second courtyard on the east side of the house.

## **PERFECT FOR A PARTY**

While he’s constantly working on the home’s interior, the exterior and grounds took Olsen approximately nine months to complete from start to finish. After the major renovations were finished, he re-christened the home “The Edgemont House,” a nod to the neighborhood’s intended name, and made his house and grounds available for event rentals. This was an important factor in designing the space, especially the courtyard to the east of the house known as Oak Alley: “This courtyard is cleaner and simpler because we use the house for functions and weddings,” Olsen says. “It’s all movable—everything except the planted trees had to be movable.”

## **THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW**

Eight Columnar English Oak trees form two rows on either side of a farmhouse table from Olsen’s furniture line Jhemajang. These narrow trees keep their defined shape as they grow; Olsen expects them to grow no more than four to five feet wide while reaching at least 80 feet tall, adding height and shade that will further define this space as the trees mature.

## FUNCTION MEETS BEAUTY

Olsen designed these brick columns to define the end of Oak Alley and provide a contrast to the white stucco seen on much of the exterior. Built-in lights and water features make them multi-functional structures, and surrounding plantings showcase his affinity for a mix-and-match style.

### Design Resources

Landscape design ***Chris H. Olsen***

Contractor ***Botanica Gardens***

Fountain and plants ***Botanica Gardens***

See the “before” photos from this project on our blog >> [Spanish Colonial Renovation in North Little Rock](#)



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