

IN THE WORLD of professional landscape designers, Leslie Bennett stands out.

She's a Harvard graduate with a degree in environmental science and public policy, with an emphasis on environmental justice and racial disparities. She also has law degrees from Columbia University in New York and University College London. Bennett is also a black woman working in an industry where women like her are rare.

Bennett, 41, owns Pine House Edible Gardens, a design-build company in Oakland, California, that specializes in edible landscapes. While being a garden designer and landscape contractor might seem like an unexpected career choice given Bennett's academic background, it makes sense when you consider how it relates to her passionate commitment to racial, social, and environmental justice, which stems from her identity as a black woman.

To Bennett, designing gardens goes well beyond making beautiful spaces. She is driven, she says, to "connect people to the land, so they value and care for the land." For her, it's also important to help clients make connections with their heritage. "I want to reshape the landscape," she says, "and make spaces that actively reflect the cultures of the people who own them." A trailblazer of sorts, Bennett sees part of her mission as "making space—both literally and figuratively—for black people and all people of color in the American concept of landscape."

"What makes Leslie's designs different is that she is deeply conscious of how gardens can be healing spaces, and she makes a point to include elements that connect her clients to the cultural influences that are important to them," says Julie Chai, a California-based garden editor who first covered Bennett's work while on staff at *Sunset* magazine. "In doing that, she creates landscapes that aren't just beautiful but also deeply meaningful."

## FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

Bennett's parents—her English mother is white and her Jamaican father is black—met in graduate school at Stanford University. They raised her to value education and academic achievements. After she graduated from Harvard in 2000, Bennett took a position with the World Health Organization in Switzerland. That work

# Leslie Bennett designing diversity

Creating landscapes that connect their owners to the land and to their cultural heritage is the mission of this innovative San Francisco Bay-area garden designer. BY NAN STERMAN



Leslie Bennett and her young son, Samuel, enjoy time together in the garden.

lead to a job in HIV/AIDS activism in Cape Town, South Africa, where Bennett was enthralled by the region's natural beauty, and surprised at how much the landscape reminded her of California.

At the same time, Bennett was struck by the experiences of the black community in the post-Apartheid period. She witnessed large numbers of black South Africans living in townships that were severely under-resourced, poorly

developed, and not reflective of the local community's ancestral culture. The people had been forcibly relocated there from traditional lands they cherished. The long-term effects on their collective psyche were hard to miss. "When you move from a land that is beautiful and means something to you to a land that is barren and disconnected from your history," she says, "there's a huge impact on your cultural identity."



**Top:** In this exuberant garden designed for a couple with Asian roots, Leslie Bennett integrated edibles such as bamboo (left background), loquat (center background), and pineapple guava (right) with a variety of drought-tolerant perennials. **Above:** Bennett and her Pine House colleague Lonna Lopez arrange plants for a backyard landscape project in Marin County.

Bennett couldn't help comparing the extreme disconnect she observed in South Africa with the community pride and sense of collective and personal identity she had seen in Marin County, just a little north of where she grew up in California. "There is no mistake. There is so much environmental activism [in Marin], because the people live so close to nature," Bennett says. "But we have to remember that the majority white population there enjoy disproportionate access to green space, etc., as a result of specific, and often racist, government land policies and histories."

After earning her law degrees, Bennett continued to be drawn by the relationship between humans and the earth. While in London doing her graduate work, she interned with the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service. There, she wrote papers on how agricultural policy affects the landscape. "The English have so much pride and relationship with their land because it looks a certain way," she says. As an example, she cites the use of hedgerows bordering farm fields. These, she notes, "really matter, not just to wildlife, but also to the people and how the people see themselves. It's a healthy, collective cultural identity tied to the land—and it's missing in the U.S."

In her first job as an attorney—with a London-based U.S. corporate law firm—Bennett unfortunately encountered rampant racism and sexism. As an antidote to the crushing stress and depression she faced at work, Bennett spent her weekends volunteering at local organic farmsteads. Eventually things at the law firm got so bad that she left. As a first step towards emotional recovery, Bennett signed up for a permaculture course at a farm outside London.

After 27 years in academia, farming was a revelation for Bennett. She began to think about farming as a way to help people like her, who were leading unfulfilling lives in the corporate world. "I was around a lot of sad lawyers at my law firm, and a lot of people in corporate life who are not living life to the fullest," she says. "I knew this was something powerful I could bring to others." This germ of an idea, to start a service-oriented business connecting people to land, would bear fruit down the line.

## TRANSITION AT TREASURE BEACH

In 2008, Bennett left England for Jamaica. She had visited there often as a child with

her family, and it seemed like a good place to heal the scars of her corporate law experience. She ended up in a tiny fishing village called Treasure Beach. For Bennett, the biggest “treasures” were the time and space to recuperate, to think about next steps, and, unexpectedly, to fall in love.

In Treasure Beach, she met a fisherman named Linval Owens, who was also looking for change. Bennett persuaded Owens to join her in working at a nearby organic farm. After a year of growing basil and growing a relationship, Bennett was ready to return to California. She found a gardening apprenticeship in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains with gardener and garden designer Patrick Rodysill.

Leslie Bennett refers to Rodysill as her mentor. But while teaching Bennett how to grow food, Rodysill recognized that Bennett also needed to heal from what she went through in England. “I didn’t push her,” Rodysill says. “We talked books. We talked music. I didn’t do my work any differently; it was just the work I do every day. And I allowed her to be Leslie.”

For Bennett, the gardening proved to be “humbling and exciting—you’re never really an expert and there is always more to learn.” And, along the way, she came to a startling realization. “In England and in Jamaica, I was so overeducated, yet here I knew nothing,” Bennett says. “I didn’t have a single useful skill. I felt useless. If someone put me outside in the California wilderness for 24 hours, I would perish!”

In Rodysill, Bennett saw someone for whom there was no conflict between the academic and the applied. “It was the first time I met someone who was very intellectual but also super practical and could fix anything,” she recalls. Bennett says Rodysill encouraged her to follow her heart. “He told me, ‘You don’t have to know everything. You don’t have to be an expert. You and your body and your hands are worth everything. Show up for whoever will talk to you and hire you. Always be honest, say what you know and what you don’t know, and charge for it.’”

Eventually, Bennett started working on her own projects and moved to Oakland, but the two still keep up. Reflecting on Bennett’s accomplishments over the last decade, Rodysill says, “She saw there could be a balance of doing something good for the community and doing something beautiful

for clients who don’t want traditional landscapes. She is taking edible landscaping and putting it in an architectural design setting.”

### BUILDING A CLIENT BASE

Today, Bennett is a licensed landscape contractor with a team of nine employees—mostly women—who design, install, and maintain gardens. She incorporated her business in 2010, working first with Owens, who followed her from Jamaica on a fiancé

mitted to diversifying the gardening community. People of color make up about 20 percent of Pine House’s clientele, and many seek out Bennett to create gardens that are beautiful and productive. Some are looking for ways to align their gardens with their culture as well.

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Leslie Bennett met her husband, Linval Owens, while working on an organic farm in Jamaica.

visa; the couple married in 2009 and now have two young children.

Her business went through several iterations in the early years, but now Owens has his own business as an organic gardener, while Bennett runs Pine House Edible Gardens. In 2013, Bennett added book author to her accomplishments with *The Beautiful Edible Garden* (Ten Speed Press), which she coauthored with a former business partner.

In addition to her focus on edibles in the landscape, Bennett is seriously com-

mitted to diversifying the gardening community. People of color make up about 20 percent of Pine House’s clientele, and many seek out Bennett to create gardens that are beautiful and productive. Some are looking for ways to align their gardens with their culture as well.

“The American landscape is racialized, and the racialized aspects are huge and obvious,” Bennett says. “Think about it: Most landscaping is done by Mexican crews working for white business owners, and most American landscaping is done for white people who live in suburbia.”

As a counterpoint to this prevailing landscape stereotype, Bennett is developing a series of Black Sanctuary Gardens, based around a pilot project in Oakland, California (see opposite page). With these culturally-grounded installations, Bennett works to create “restorative, plant-based spaces for peace, self-care, and inspiration for the black community,” especially for women.

**L**ESLIE BENNETT'S dedication to her community and social justice is deep-rooted. So a few years ago, she committed to create at least one garden each year for a black woman in her hometown of Oakland, California, regardless of that woman's budget. Her pledge morphed into her Black Sanctuary Gardens project.

Bennett says black women are her priority because black women bear the brunt of racism and sexism (among other oppressive systems) in this country. She says, "It is exhausting to deal with [racism and sexism], and I think we deserve beautiful places to rest and be restored." Bennett decided to document the garden series photographically because she wanted to create and see more imagery of black women in gardens.

Bennett's goal is to create at least ten gardens, each in a private garden space, especially those used for community activism. That made the garden of her client, Nwamaka Agbo, the perfect site for the first Black Sanctuary Garden.



## BLACK SANCTUARY GARDENS: HEALING SPACES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Agbo, who is Nigerian American, shares a home with her husband, Misha Balmer, who is Japanese American. Bennett designed their small backyard simply, yet elegantly, with elements traditional to its owners' cultures. "We wanted the space to feel lush and retreatlike, yet low maintenance," Agbo says. Agbo asked for a color palette of deep green foliage with contrasting hues of oranges, yellows, deep reds, and purples, accomplished with the help of dahlias, roses, and other plants. Edibles such as plums, persimmons, figs, citrus trees, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, grapes, and apples provide fresh fruit nearly year-round.

Every other month, upwards of 20 women assemble in the garden for a black women's freedom circle. They come together in sisterhood, to talk about issues like how to cultivate joy as people of color and as women, and how to support each other. It is a space



**Above: Nwamaka Agbo and her husband, Misha Balmer, relax in the Black Sanctuary Garden Bennett designed for them. Top: The garden, which incorporates a variety of edible plants, serves as a regular gathering place for women of color.**

for healing, reflection, and laughter. "For me, working with Leslie felt like a

partnership," Agbo says. "She invested in ensuring that the space I created for my family and friends was welcoming."

Bennett's next Black Sanctuary Garden will be a collaboration with the Alena Museum in Oakland, a creative space for the region's African diaspora. Seven Asefaha, the museum's founder and primary curator, explains that "greenery in urban environments is an afterthought, so the idea is to use plant life to beautify an area that has been neglected."

Elizabeth D. Foggie, who is serving as project manager, describes Bennett as a "garden installation artist." "For me," she says, "the Black Sanctuary Garden is for rest and rejuvenation, it is for cultural reflection and a connection with nature. Often we see urban and black environments that are devoid of plant life, whether edible or medicinal—and that further alienates us from being a part of nature, as regenerative, resilient, adaptable." —N.S.



Chinotto oranges, above, and an antique grape press, right, reflect the Italian heritage of one of Bennett's clients. The grape press was salvaged from a winery owned by the garden owner's great grandparents.



For all of her clients, Bennett looks for creative ways to connect them to the land, using elements from their cultures and ethnic heritages. “How do we make the land matter and how do we have people have relationships with the land?” Bennett asks. “Food is such a great way to make that connection; beauty is second; and then these cultural elements, the things that help us to know who we are and why we matter. Those are the things I am trying to bring together in my gardens. My goal is to help people to have a relationship with their land.”

The owners of one garden she oversees, for example, are Japanese and Chinese American. For them, Bennett planted a flowering plum tree that erupts into bloom just in time for Lunar New Year. She designed their garden to include edible plants common to their culinary heritages—edible bamboos, persimmons, edible gingers, and unusual varieties of citrus, among others. The husband is interested in “re-wilding” the garden with edible weeds, so Bennett helped him accomplish this goal, while ensuring the garden retains its overall design integrity and aesthetic.

Another of Pine House's clients is a woman of Italian heritage who sought Bennett out after seeing one of her gardens at a flower show. An avid cook and flower arranger whose great grandparents emigrated to California from Italy at the turn of the

20th century, she asked Bennett to transform her acre of land using as many edibles as possible. Bennett is redoing the landscape section by section, and the garden overflows with fruits, vegetables, and herbs, including Italian favorites such as artichoke, lavender, eggplant, tomatoes, peppers, figs, cardoon, and chinotto (*Citrus myrtifolia*), a type of orange, the juice of which is used to flavor sodas and the aperitif Campari.

One garden bed incorporates a century-old grape press from the woman's

great grandparents' winery in Northern California. The enormous wood and steel structure supports fava beans in spring, and pumpkin vines all summer.

According to the owner, Bennett has an “enthusiasm to use the earth that's infectious. She brings an intelligence and knowledge I respect and depend on. My garden produces more than I could ever imagine.”

### REFLECTING ON THE JOURNEY

Bennett acknowledges her career's twists and turns. “It has truly been an interesting journey,” she says. “I spent so much time writing and thinking academically about landscapes and how they matter to people. And now it is so cool to be on the creative side, creating landscapes for people, landscapes that matter to them.”

“As a landscape designer—a black female landscape designer,” she says, “I'm proud. It's hard and complex—it's a big part of who I am—my blackness and my womanhood, and it's unfortunately rare. I hope more black women and women of color see me, and see that there is room for them to do it too.”



A young persimmon has yet to ripen to its iconic orange color in the Asian-heritage garden.

*Nan Stermán is a garden writer, designer, and host of the award-winning PBS television show A Growing Passion. She lives in Encinitas, California.*