

Green Goddess

MONIQUE CAPANELLI, FOUNDER OF ARTICULTURE DESIGNS, AND HER PASSIONATE QUEST TO MAKE AUSTIN GREENER – ONE BACKYARD AND WEDDING AT A TIME.

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WHEN MONIQUE CAPANELLI AND HER FIANCE Danté Dominick were planning their wedding two years ago, all they wanted to do was keep it affordable while at the same time being the least wasteful possible, following their usual lifestyle. Disposable plates and cutlery were a no-go, as was pre-packaged food and cut flowers. Instead, they placed an ad on Craigslist for unwanted plates, glasses and silverware, bought local products for their food and beverages, and Capanelli herself designed her bouquet and table décor out of native plants and succulents, including some from her garden. Eighty people partying for more than seven hours produced only two small bags of trash, and after thoroughly washing it, all dishware went to charities. Before she knew it, she was interviewed by local TV stations and magazines about her “green wedding,” a term now in vogue and widely sought after by Earth-conscious brides.



Monique Capanelli, founder of Articulture Designs, hard at work.

Thirty-six-year old Capanelli, born and raised in the agriculturally rich Sonoma, CA, grew up in a family that owned a restaurant in the Napa area that was purchasing local organic produce before Alice Waters ever opened Chez Panisse. Her love for all things green and fresh flourished there and it continued after she moved to Austin to attend The University of Texas. After graduation, she supplemented her income by working at a local restaurant, Louie's 106, around 2001. Her talent for botanicals soon had her caring for all indoor plants and fresh flower arrangements at the restaurant. Her co-worker (now husband) Danté encouraged her to proceed and pursue her real passion by starting her own business, which they named Plantworks by Monique. "My first arrangements were a bit gaudy, with Stargazer lilies, wax flowers and roses, but it worked for the Old-World style at Louie's," she states. Slowly, her regular bar customers started giving her little jobs planting containers at their homes or doing flowers for events. Interested in pursuing this as a career, she was encouraged by friends to get a job at a local nursery. "I decided I'd do it, but I wouldn't work for anyone except for Big Red Sun," she laughs. Her lofty ambition soon turned into her dream job in 2005, when she began as a nursery hand, soaking up plant knowledge every minute. Soon she started designing the popular container gardens that became the hip East Austin nursery's signature, as well as botanical and floral design for weddings and special events, practically becoming the public face of Big Red Sun. After four years and a brief stay at Root Design, she decided to venture on her own, this time for good.

This Spring she founded Articulture Designs to provide landscape design, interior plant design and floral event décor, utilizing organic and native materials when possible. Capanelli recycles exhaustively, and thanks to her knowledge and certification in Permaculture Design, she incorporates sustainability and functionality into everything she does. Her unique artistic creativity, and her affordable alternative to high-end outlets, offers her customers a wide range of possibilities.

Once she set up her company, she hit the ground running with two high-profile projects. First, she was invited to be one of the 30 artists asked to turn a used wine barrel into a work of art for Barrels Across Texas, a fundraiser event organized by the Texas Hill Country Wine and Food Festival. Out of her wine barrel, Capanelli created a small, self-

sustaining ecosystem featuring several varieties of edible herbs and flowers, a running fountain, and other features for attracting wildlife such as birds, butterflies and bees. The barrel is not only a beautiful garden piece, but a functional kitchen accessory as well. Her next big venture was with Art Alliance Austin for the Austin Fine Arts Festival, which was held downtown on April 25th and 26th. She has been part of the event the past two years while working for Big Red Sun, so when the landscaping company backed out at the last minute, Art Alliance Austin's executive director Meredith Powell called on Capanelli. Her work on the beautification of the Lounges and the area for Art After Dark, the events 'VIP' party, included stunning centerpieces, staging plants, staging lighting and other decor.

Capanelli's design philosophy is simple, but she has such an interesting eye for spaces and excellent knowledge of plant species, which helps the overall effect of the complete work. "Defining the space with stone and pathways delineates the way we move through and function in the landscape, and that's important. But the greatness I think that we really all are attracted to is what plants do, what they trigger in us, in the senses, form, color, excitement and surprise, and the fluidity that they create. I think the stone pathways are the rigidity, and the plants become the color and texture palette," she explains. She works with other local experts to create custom-made benches, containers, and water features, and is also excellent at mosaic design and installation. For people with limited space, Capanelli sees a garden in practically any container, from an old tin can to a rusty cast iron skillet, an old cement planter, a discarded wooden crate, or an old vase from a second hand store. Her imagination is only limited by plant availability.

Aside from tending to every aspect of her budding company, she finds time for other projects. "one is that I am volunteering with Habitat for Humanity to lead the design and installation of native landscapes for two families in May. The days set so far for installation are May 16th and May 23rd. I am also volunteering with the Green Corn Project which installs vegetable gardens for low income families." Clearly, this passionate young entrepreneur has all her agaves in a row. ★



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