

Reinventing the Cactus Garden

An incredible hermitage near Joshua Tree National Park

A hundred years ago, those searching the Southwest for turquoise and gold were the early discoverers of curious cactus and desert plants. These living things were gathered, with minerals and pioneer relics, at Route 66 tourist traps where a rather odd aesthetic emerged. Sadly it faded away with the vanishing rock shops and overnight stops, but in California's high desert north of Palm Springs, it is rising again in a whole new light.¹

Not far from Joshua Tree National Park this old school vernacular has been reinvented at Mojave Rock Ranch by the most unlikely gardeners. Here Dutch-born Gino Dreese and Floridian Troy Williams painstakingly created a cactus garden of monumental

proportions (Fig. 1). Faced with winter snow, bedrock and high winds, they learned, through twenty years of trial and error, exactly what will grow outdoors year around.

"A cactus garden just isn't complete without rocks," Gino explained as we sipped martinis upon the fabulous view terrace (Fig. 2). "Sure, you can plant them in other scenarios, but when you study these plants in nature and where they choose to grow, it's almost always in association with rock. This is why we love using minerals and exotic stone in all our gardens."

But the Ranch is certainly the epicenter of what is now their signature style. Minerals are front and center, not simply as accents within the planting, but as part of all the architecture. In the beginning they utilized what was available, since their ridge itself is rich



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1. What makes the Ranch so amazing is how organic architecture, stone and plants blend into a single, seamless whole..



2. Though it may look all natural, a great deal of engineering was required to help plants become established on this blistering south exposure on near vertical cliffs. In minerals and an abandoned turquoise mine nearby supplied the first brightly colored stone.

Over time they discovered one of the best rock yards in the west, Whitewater Rock and Supply, where they stock far more than just flagstone or landscape boulders. This extensive stoneyard features whole palettes of curious crystals, slag glass, and stone from around the world. “That is my supermarket,” said Gino, who could spend days wandering this huge place in search of just the right colored stone to add zest to a cactus garden. “Thankfully they’re very generous with samples,” he adds, smiling. Those samples can be seen at the ranch both as loose rock and in the amazing masonry, which gives the simple site its unique character.

Like so many things, to understand their work, you must understand their origins which reach back to the Old World. Gino’s father had returned to Amsterdam after escaping a Nazi concentration camp as a teen. Much of Europe’s cities that had been bombed to rubble. As a result, the rebuilding effort going on throughout Gino’s childhood utilized every piece of rubble stone, tile or block because many of the factories were devastated. Thus masonry began a tradition



3. The high edge of the patio is bounded by a rustic railing and large chunks of pumice hollowed out to support a wide range of smaller species.



4. This irregular edge wall in lieu of railing is rich with fossils and minerals with seat walls topped with soft Arizona flagstone.

of building with irregular materials such as the remnants of shattered sculptures, porcelains and ceramics. There's no question this influenced Gino's interest in unusual materials.

It may be that Simon Rhodia was similarly influenced by the post war rubble as evidenced in his amazing Watts Towers. This same tradition is demonstrated in all the masonry at the ranch, which blends rock with hundreds of objects from silver spoons to broken sculpture and recycled bottles.

At the Ranch, Troy Williams' degree in environmental design helped lay out a series of enormous, irregular terraces and retaining walls around steep rocky point where the house is located. These terraces perfectly reflect the landform so that the garden flows naturally down the bedrock cliffs (Fig. 4).

"We can't dig holes here at all," Troy explained. "There's no drainage on the bedrock so we began to build up instead." The terraces were filled with material from sandy dry washes on the property for rapid drainage.

The typical planting process at the ranch is labor intensive. "We build up an irregular wall around each new plant. Into that we dump desert sand mixed with potting soil to fill the cavity. It's porous and drains to



5. This snow-white mammillaria thrives in the reflected heat of this west facing niche in the stonework..



6. Bedrock erupts along the entry walk bound by irregular colonies of golden barrels.

weep holes in the sides, which keeps the root zone well above bedrock.” However, the rubble masonry style blends perfectly into the existing rock outcroppings so there’s never evidence that such a structure has been added. For this the creators are using native rock so that it blends in with the existing color and texture of the land. (Fig. 5)

A closer look at the way they have planted this landscape again reaches back to the Old World. There are true mixed borders here where Dreese-Williams have blended cactus to create an effect that is so dense it evokes visions of Gertrude Jekyll’s English perennial borders. “You must have yellow,” Gino says of his beloved bevy of golden barrel cactus that have grown to mammoth proportions on a diet of Miracle Gro (Fig. 6). “There is so much blue in succulents that you need a powerful yellow to set them off all year around.”

At the ranch you approach the front door, a river of golden barrel cactus that flows down slope as you rise to the front door. They are right at home in that elevation of the desert that allows for air movement to maintain more moderate winter temperatures than sites with cold air drainage nearby.

“Our greatest challenge up here is finding cactus and other succulents that can stand up to the cold. Heat is no problem.”

Success came slowly to the ranch. “We’ve killed a lot of plants.” In fact, one feature of the property is an enormous pile of defunct cacti that surround a vintage marble gravestone (Fig. 7). This demonstrates the subtle sense of humor that underlies the entire landscape, with fun surprises in ground and in the collage-like masonry. This too is a feature of old European



7. The corpses of dead cacti are gathered here around an old 19th century marble grave stone that is nicely illuminated after dark.



7. This densely planted edge evokes the same look as an English perennial border using barrel cactus, cholla, cleistocactus, and golden barrels.

gardens, and here these unique discoveries include ancient Persian tiles and Italian hand blown glass.

“The rule we always follow in grouping plants is water requirements so we can make sure those with similar needs are together. We use sprinklers for overhead watering since excavation is so difficult. That allows us to water more or less with each unique group. Broadcast irrigation doesn’t allow us to special-ly water certain plants, and these require hand watering during the growing season of spring and summer.”

While the plants in this landscape aren’t particularly rare, it’s the sheer number and specimen sizes that make this a stand out site. The use of broken tile and pottery as mulches gives the borders a unique appearance, dividing the walking surface from that which is planted. In every direction lies a great view, every composition picture perfect, and Gino, the expert at pruning turns native creosote and palo verde trees into sinuous works of art.

This is such a rare landscape that I do not expect to find another of equal value during my lifetime. Most of all though, it brought me back to that very early model of Southwestern cactus gardens created

by desert rats who spend their lives in the wilderness. Only now, with the emphasis on recycled objects in so many highbrow landscapes, the Mojave Rock Ranch style is suddenly trendy for succulent lovers well beyond the far desert horizon.

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The Mojave Rock Ranch is a select location for private events, photo shoots and film locations. Explore this and other Dreese-Williams gardens at the web site.