

DESERT

September 2015

ENDLESS SUMMER

Cool
Swimwear

GARDEN PARTY

More green,
less water

ROAD TRIP

Baja
California



Green Gardens

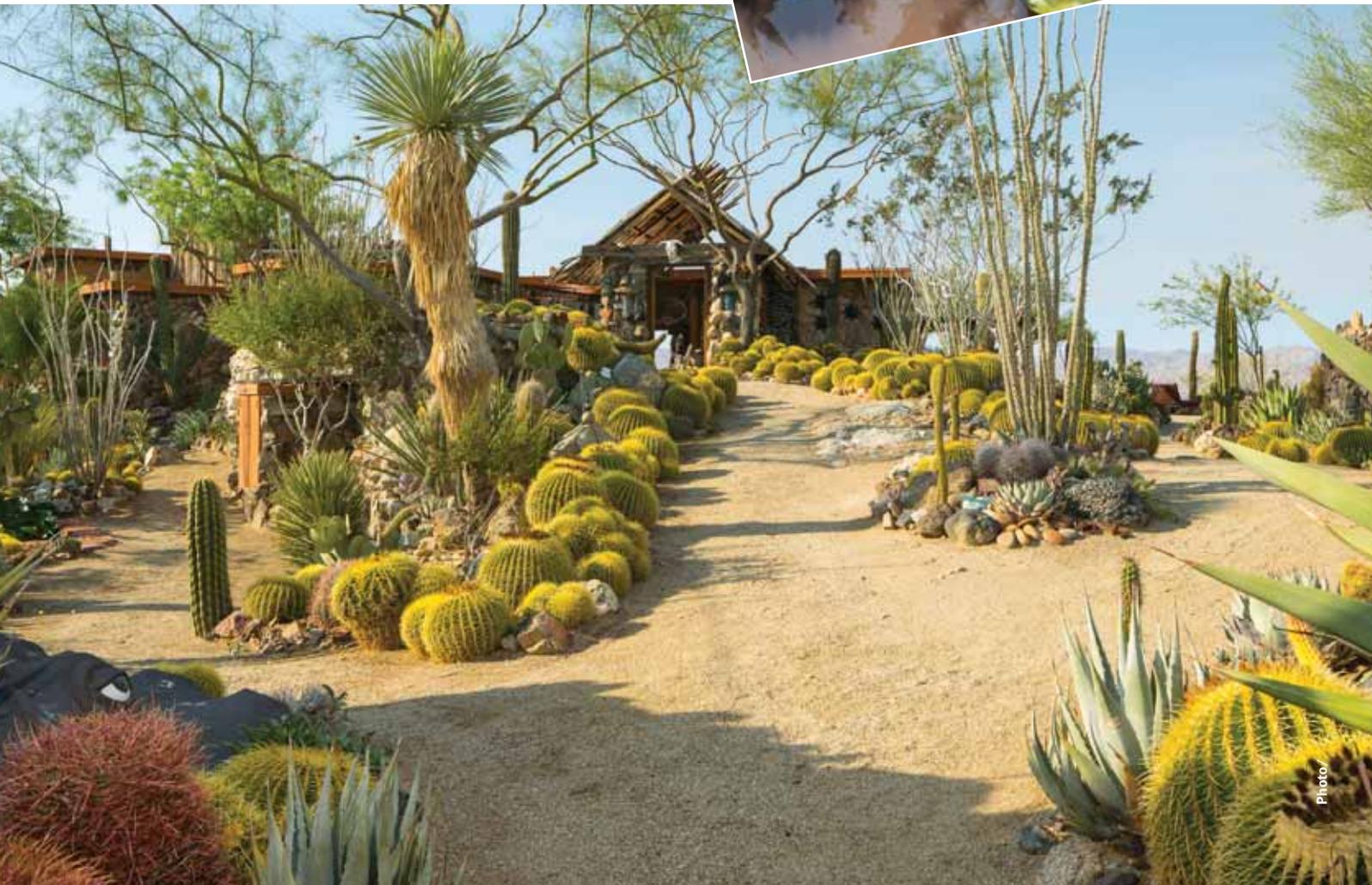
Local horticulturists and landscape designers create verdant yards with less water.

Photographs by Lance Gerber

The term “desertscaping” often conjures images of a barren aesthetic — a bed of decomposed granite sparsely dotted with cactus — that mimics the most arid wild desert landscape. And while a return to native planting is imperative amid California’s historic drought (some 41 percent of the state currently faces what is called exceptional drought, the worst in a five-scale rating), local horticulturists and landscape designers agree that you can still achieve “lush” with less water. “People have a mistaken idea that eco-friendly landscaping has to mean a barrel of cactus, a lantana and a boulder,” says designer Dann Foley. “But we can layer various species of desert plants in such a way that they create a lot of texture and color.” Foley, along with fellow landscape designers Gino Dreese and Troy Williams, and horticulturist Maureen Gilmer, tells us how to design our ideal desert garden — from simple and sparse to dense and vibrant.

RIGHT: Golden barrel cactus, cereus, cholla, agave and ocotillo are among native selections that do well in the high desert environment.

BELOW: A small water feature at Mojave Rock Ranch in Joshua Tree houses waterlilies, goldfish, mosquito fish, frogs and a turtle, and adds a refreshing element to the desert garden.



The high and low desert environments are vastly different, and gardening should reflect that, says Maureen Gilmer. “While the valley floor has a tropical desert, winds are very drying in the more exposed high desert, and during winter months, the temperature often drops below freezing.” Plant native trees, cactus and succulents that can withstand the harsh extremes of sun, wind and frost and snow.

Colorful planting pots and various yard art are fun additions to a desert garden. Avid travelers Troy and Gino have collected “souvenirs” from over 50 countries across six continents, which they’ve built into the landscape as well as the interior and exterior design of their Mojave Rock Ranch home.

At Mojave Rock Ranch, owners Troy and Gino begin planting in autumn. “Planting design should include a variety of shapes, structures, textures and colors,” says Troy, who aims to create as much dimension as possible. They start with taller plants in the back and layer the yard with smaller plants in front. “This method looks the most natural.”





The first thing to consider when designing a garden, Maureen says, is what area you look at most — from inside the home or in an outdoor living space. “Use bigger, more expensive plants in places where they’re most frequently seen.” A glass wall at Mojave Rock Ranch serves as a window to the property’s vast and magnificent landscape. Monster saguaro cactus and chubby golden barrels in the side garden are hugged by bright, dancing ocotillo and layers of diverse succulents.



The low desert garden of this o2 Architecture-designed home in Rancho Vista Trail features drought- and frost-tolerant, slow growing and low maintenance plants: artichoke agave, blue cliesto, golden barrel cactus, resin spurge, and beaked yucca.

The owner of this Las Palmas home worked with o2 Architects to create a garden with drought-tolerant plants that required minimal maintenance. Pencil cactus (fire sticks), golden barrel cactus, aloe vera, Trailing Indigo Bush, Texas sage, Sharkskin agave, wormwood, and Mexican Fence Post cactus are sparsely planted across the landscape. "Some desert plants like to be separated so they don't compete for water," Maureen explains.



To create a colorful garden that's reminiscent of the Mediterranean outside their Palm Springs abode, Troy and Gino layer such drought-tolerant plants as acacia, salvia, senna, vitex and rosemary. They sprinkle in succulents like agave, aloe, pink pedilanthus and euphorbia to incorporate a "desert feel." Dann, who specializes in lush landscape design, prefers to plant a variety of species that bloom at different times of the year, so a garden is always "alive" and colorful. Two plants he favors are lantana and Crown of Thorns.

"Lantana — which I like to use a variety of — needs room to grow and should be planted where it can spread," he explains. "Crown of Thorns spreads quickly and flowers all year long in petals that are different sizes and colors — red, yellow, white and orange." Flowering vines, river rock and decomposed granite in a natural color like Palm Springs Gold are other accents he often layers in a garden. "These should be used as accents and not as bedding or replacement for grass," he says. For ground coverage, he relies on plants. "This is where lantana comes in. Succulents become shrub-like and change color — grey to green to orange — so your landscape is always colorful and changing throughout the year." When layering green plants, be careful to vary the shade, shape, size and texture. "This blend is what makes a garden beautiful."



While the low desert is considered a “tropical” one, it’s still not hospitable to tropical flowers like hibiscus. Stick to drought-resistant plants that produce an array of colors and add water features — such as a fountain or koi pond, as Troy and Gino did — to create a more coastal feel.



By using only native plants, you’ll save not only water (use a drip system), but also time and cost for landscaping. Desert plants require less pruning — in fact, many do best when you leave them alone to grow “wild.”

Bougainvillea, autumn sage, cape honeysuckle, desert rose (right) and pachypodium lamarei (far right) add diversity and intense color to a tropical desert garden.

