

GARDEN DESIGN

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APRIL 2005

Virginia Garden:
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Arizona Style:
Colorful, Smart

Very Special Rhodies

Bunny Williams'
Woodsy Wonderland

way
hot
100

Best of the New Plants, Collectibles,
Natives, Tropicals—Top Planting Ideas





Left: Steve Martino fits right in among his favorite native cactus and succulents. Right: His typical plant palette includes brash pink bougainvillea overgrowing a screening wall, desert gems such as spiky agaves and a lacy yellow-flowering palo verde tree.

arizona style

We can all learn from desert landscape pioneer Steve Martino and fellow designers who create work that is ecofriendly, livable, locally just right



BY SUSAN HEEGER
PRODUCED AND PHOTOGRAPHED
BY STEVE GUNTHER

UNDER A WIDE BLUE BOWL OF SKY, THE SONORAN DESERT RAMBLES THROUGH SOUTHERN ARIZONA, jumping mountains, crossing plains and river washes, and sweeping through Phoenix and Tucson on its way to Mexico. A place of extremes (baking summers, sometimes frigid winters; populous cities, yawning tracts of arid wilds), it's elementally lovely—and intimidating. So much so, says Phoenix landscape architect Steve Martino, that gardeners have tried hard to erase it. “Thirty years ago,” he remembers, “when I started practicing, this desert was seen as a wasteland to be greened up and ‘improved,’ its native plants as vermin to be eradicated.”

True, this is the same desert where Frank Lloyd Wright built his scrub-edged Scottsdale home, Taliesin West, in the 1930s. But more recently, a gold rush of development has swept the Sonoran Desert, plunking down miles of thirsty golf courses, gated lawns, palm groves and flower beds. In response, design mavericks like Martino have been developing a more regionally apt approach that gives this superimposed Eden a run for its money.

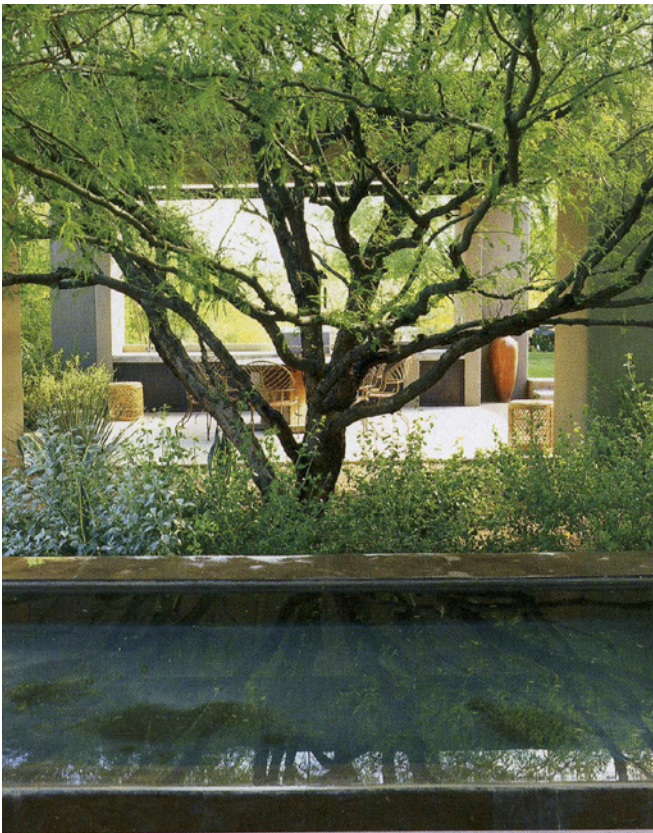
Since water is and always has been scarce in Arizona, intense greens seem out of place. Martino saw this back in the 1970s and, inspired by self-sown plants on vacant lots, began using

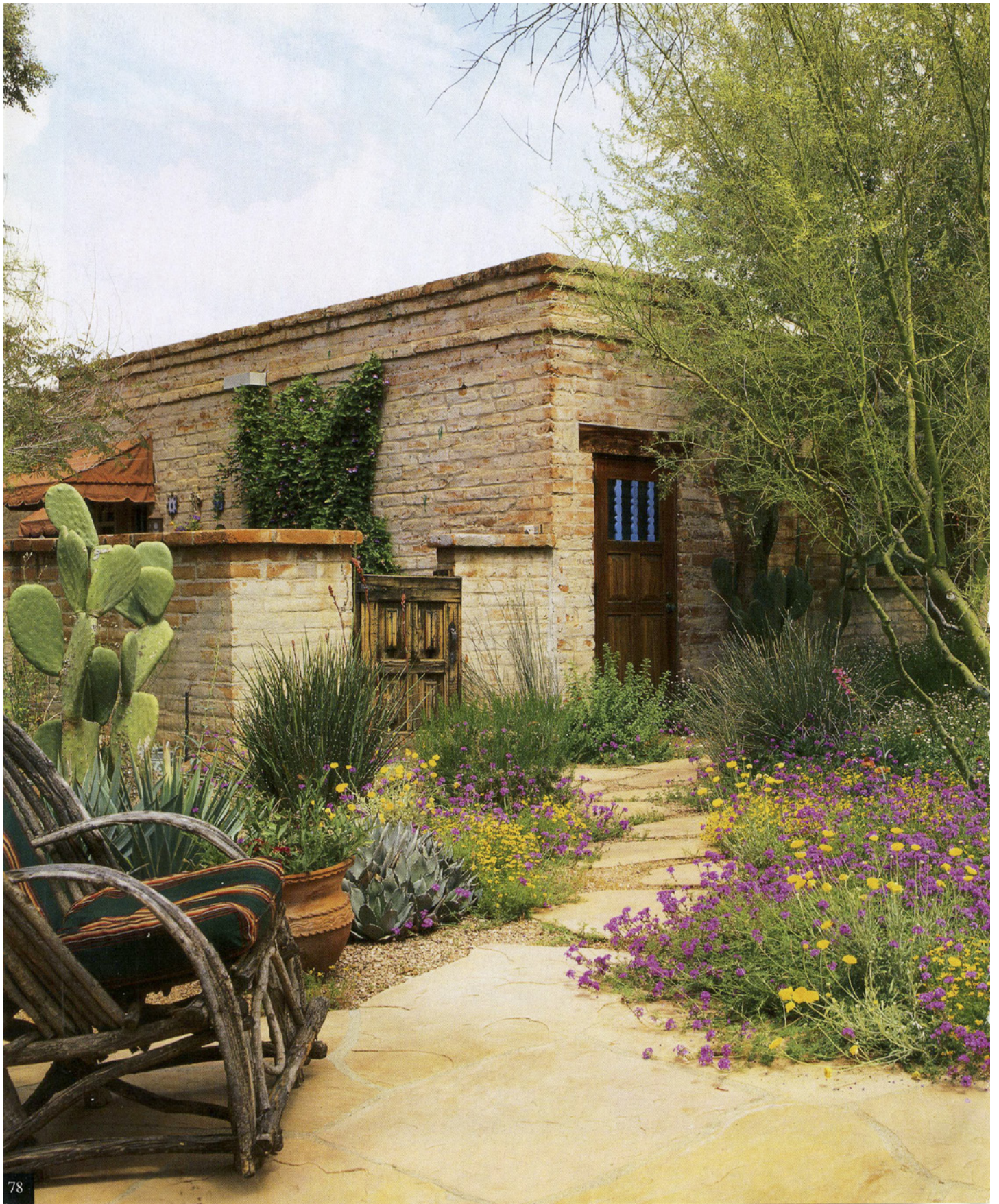
Below: More Martino touches—attention-getting aloes and agave. From top left, clockwise: Water trough, native mesquite tree, outdoor dining area. What an orange wall can do to an auto court! Blue wall intensifies yellow aloe. In courtyard garden, a steel shield spilling water focuses the view from a bedroom.

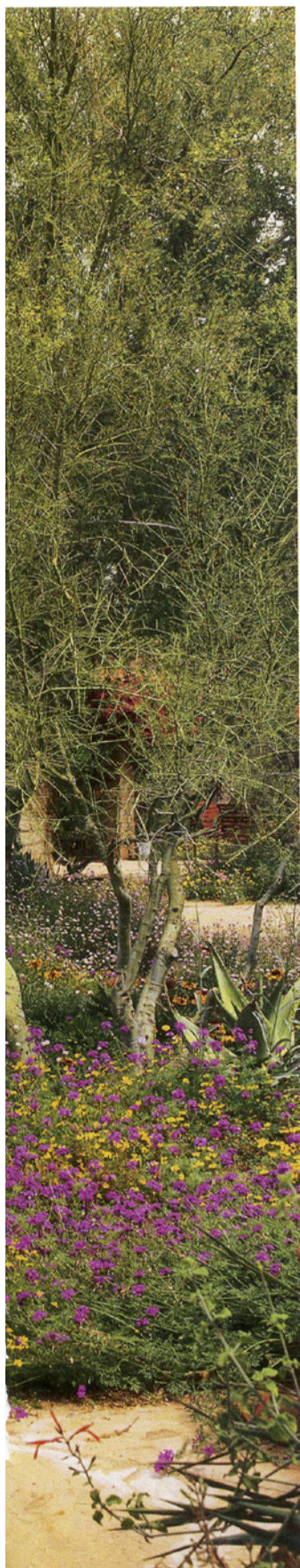
“TO EVOKE THE DESERT, ALL YOU NEED
IS A SUGGESTION, A PATCH OF PLANTS
AGAINST A WALL”

—STEVE MARTINO









natives to link his gardens to the surrounding wild landscape. He embraced the spirit of the setting by letting plants grow in their natural shapes and even tangle with one another, attracting what he calls an “entourage” of wildlife. His gardens appeared in books and magazines, prompting other designers to seek natives and thus inviting more into the nursery trade. Over the past two decades, a distinctive and diverse Arizona style has taken shape that celebrates the desert—its plants, views, history and terrain—rather than disdaining it.

Phoenix-based Christine Ten Eyck, who once worked for Martino, is committed to “bringing desert back to the city” rather literally, in fact. “I don’t see plants as decoration,” she says. “I think in terms of plant communities and habitat that evoke real places, like the native mesquite, chuparosa, wolfberry and deer grass of a desert arroyo.”

In Tucson, Margaret Joplin focuses more broadly on regionally “appropriate” metal work and plants, which may include sculptural Mexican agaves, as well as Arizona’s own saguaros. Like Martino, Joplin is inspired by the late Mexican architect Luis Barragan and often plants against brightly colored walls that hold their own in blinding Arizona light. Ten Eyck, moved by the local legacy of Native Americans, prefers less-assertive walls that leave dramatic color to the plants.

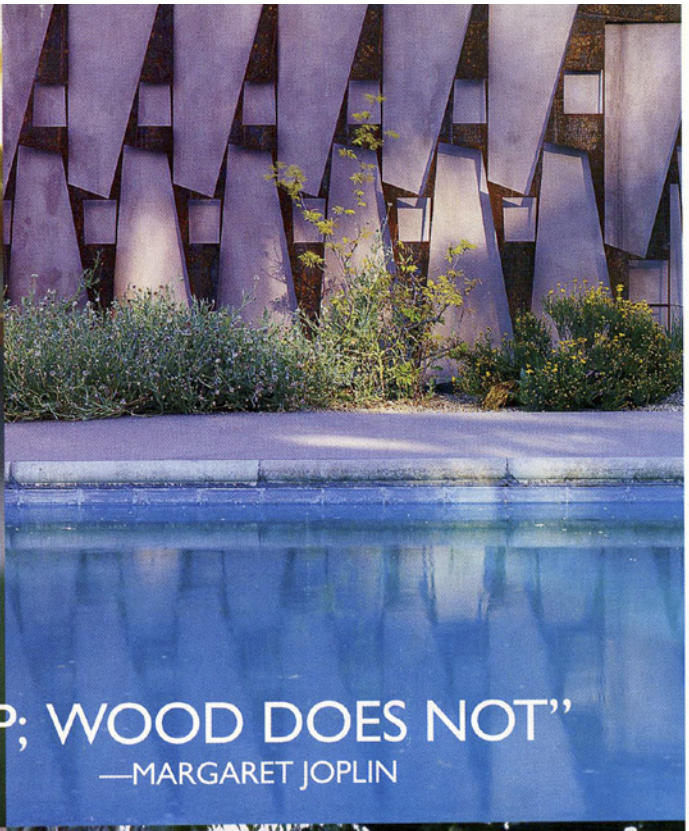
Landscape architect Christy Ten Eyck (above) invited the desert back into this Phoenix garden by tearing down a wall, eliminating the deck and lawn and planting drifts of desert natives. The flagstone paving leads to the house, past purple verbena, desert marigold and a grove of palo verde trees.

But what these landscape architects share, besides a love for the desert, is a yen to get people out into it—to lounge, walk and admire the views despite the harshness of the sun. Shelter is crucial to their designs as is making the most of garden exposures that provide shifting shade throughout the day. Well-placed trees and garden pavilions appear frequently in their schemes, and water is precious for both its music and visual comfort in a drought-prone place.

Just as critical are paving choices, such as tinted concrete, that absorb rather than reflect heat, and fencing materials that don't disintegrate with exposure. "Metal holds up; wood does not," says Joplin, known for innovative use of scrap steel to make woven barriers that admit views while keeping out coyotes. Similarly, Martino's hefty stucco walls, often curved or tilted, may be windowed to "borrow" distant mountains. And Ten Eyck sometimes constructs entire garden rooms from thick-gauge concrete-reinforcing wire swathed in queen's

Below: Margaret Joplin with gate made of rebar. Clockwise from top left: Rebar fencepost. The backdrop for arid-loving perennials is salvaged cortin steel with laser cutouts. Steel trellis with yellow orchid vine (*Mascagnia macroptera*). Slipper plant (*Pedilanthus macrocarpus*) against steel sheets from which mailbox flaps were cut.





“METAL HOLDS UP; WOOD DOES NOT”
—MARGARET JOPLIN







“SMALL GESTURES GET LOST HERE” —LARRY KORNEGAY

wreath or native trumpet vines. “It’s wonderful,” she says, “to feel embraced by planting and still open to the desert.”

Such openness, says Joplin, is itself an inspiration: “It eases the boundaries of your thinking.” At the same time, since the surrounding desert is so monumental, the scale of outdoor elements must keep pace. “Small gestures get lost here,” says Tempe artist Larry Kornegay, who has created plant containers as wide as 4 feet to suit the landscapes of local designers. Forged of heavy, integrally colored concrete, his pots are designed to make the most of desert light and shadows. One style was inspired by the ribbed texture of saguaro trunks. And in consideration of desert winters, all are engineered to withstand a freeze and thaw.

The garden makers’ concerns are just as practical—plants must be sturdy. “I don’t want to work at keeping them alive,” says Martino. Yet while his palette includes shaggy palo verde, wild penstemon and sage, his designs tend toward the simple. “To evoke the desert,” he believes, “all you need is a suggestion, a patch of plants against a wall.” Ten Eyck agrees. But she adds that such specimens as ocotillo and mesquite “are not plants the average homeowner sees as ornamental. Our goal is to get people used to a different kind of landscape.” In other words, she concludes, “I may not be trying to make a mark on the land. Or if I am, it’s a quiet mark.”

Larry and Paula Kornegay (the latter manages the business) with a few of their creations, past and future. Opposite: Big bold planters meet their match in desert plants. Three containers in the Ribbed Series hold, left to right, *Yucca rostrata*, slipper plant and *Cereus peruvianus* (background). Design by Laskin & Associates, Phoenix.