

GREEN HOUSE, RAINBOW GARDEN

A view garden blossoms with color and commitment

BY MARY JAMES • PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOB WIGAND

ON THEIR TRAVELS to every continent but Antarctica, the homeowners constantly snapped pictures of gardens and plants they admired. When it was time to landscape the grounds around their San Diego residence, their photo library inspired lively discussions with landscape designer Frank Mitzel of Aesthetic Design and landscape designer and contractor Randy Laurie of Laurie's Landscaping.

“We told them we wanted fragrance and plenty of color all year long. We wanted unusual plants, not everyday varieties,” says one owner. “Most importantly, we wanted to move toward xeriscape and to bring science and technology to bear on reducing water use.”

The strolling garden for a recently remodeled eco-friendly home bursts with color year-round while meeting the owners' request for a waterwise landscape. In spring bloom spikes tower above *Agave desmettiana*.





Repurposed iron fencing flanks the steely blades of 'Blue Star' agave. In front of it are (from left) black-edged *Agave parryi truncata*, pink-tinged *Aloe rubroviolacea* and 'Kara's Stripes' agave.

The design would be as eco-friendly as the green smart home that the gardens would surround. For more than a year, the 2-acre view site had bustled with activity as the couple extensively remodeled their 1970s-era home, striving to be "as green as possible." (For more on the home redo, see page 44.) With construction completed on the Frank Lloyd Wright-influenced makeover, the existing landscaping would be updated and extended over two adjacent lots the owners had purchased.

Today, what had been mostly a dusty dirt parking lot for construction crews is a strolling garden with sinuous gravel paths, view seating and sophisticated drought-tolerant plantings. Over the seasons, the owners are treated to towering agave bloom spikes buzzing with bees, carpets of hot-hued ice plants, the swirling scents of rosemary and jasmine and exotic passion-vine flowers that lure nectar-hungry butterflies.

Closer to the home, palms accent an indoor pool pavilion, as well as surrounding patios and a wing with guestrooms. For now, a slice of emerald lawn links foundation plantings with the strolling garden to the south, but it may be eliminated as the landscape's xeriscape footprint grows.

At the western edge, on a slender white pole, a weather station whirs, collecting climate data that controls a sophisticated irrigation system with more than three dozen zones. It has reduced water consumption on the grounds by more than a third.

While neither homeowner is a hands-on gardener, both enjoy garden walks after long days at their high-tech businesses. Along the way, they may pause to snip a spent flower or marvel at dozens of flitting hummingbirds.

"Fragrant and colorful," Mitzel says, "this garden is a feast for all the senses, in all seasons."

Views and Viewpoints

From the entry gates at the top of a long driveway, to a dry streambed at its far edges, the landscape's recurring curves and vivid colors contrast with the home's bold geometry and earth tones.

Around the motor court at the home's entrance, frothy purple statice and lemon-yellow bulbine blend with mounded rosettes of 'Kiwi' aeonium and sculptural agaves, furcraeas and desert spoon (*Dasyllirion wheeleri*). Standing like a sentinel near the front door is a *Yucca rostrata* with its icy-blue blades. "All hint at the plants found in the rest of the garden," Laurie says.

Similar contrasts appear in plantings outside the west-facing master suite and living and dining rooms. Bronze-leaved phormiums skirted by red-flowered 'Little John' bottlebrush cast spiky shadows on the walls while two plumerias float tropical fragrance outside the master bedroom's windows.

A raised fire feature enjoyed from a patio off the living room is ringed by plants with flame-colored flowers and foliage including



Close to the house, a queen palm adds a tropical note.

'Jester' leucadendron, 'Superb' grevillea, and 'Big Red', 'Harmony' and 'Bush Tango' kangaroo paws. "None blocks views of the city and water," Laurie says. "And they bring in colors that the owners love."

A flagstone sidewalk wends past 180-degree views at the property's edge to the pool pavilion patios, where friends and family gather when the owners entertain. Here and around the guest wing, king and queen palms bring a hint of the tropics while three large ficus trees cast cool shade on the lawn and beds of rosemary, lantana, fortnight lilies and Santa Barbara daisies.

"The owners are fond of fronds," says Mitzel. "The more drought-tolerant plants radiate out further away from the house. In San Diego's climate we can pretty much get away with 'anything grows and anything goes' and still achieve harmony in the garden."

West of the pool pavilion, outside the strolling garden, is a flagstone-paved circle where two chairs face the ever-changing sky. The owners call it "the promontory." "We love this spot," one says. "It's the best view on the property — across the canyon and over the city to the water beyond."

Form and Color

Options for enjoying the strolling garden abound. Neighbors often view it from a perch near the home's entry gates. The owners

get a bird's-eye view from seating near the crest of a landscaped slope at the strolling garden's east edge. Most often they wander its crunchy gravel paths or relax on curved built-in banquettes, savoring color-drenched views to the sea beyond.

Slope plantings and the strolling garden's three amoeba-shaped beds display Laurie's expert eye for unusual showy succulents and other dramatic but easy-care plants and trees. "The variety and colors are designed to draw you in," says Laurie, who features dozens of little-known aloes and agaves around the garden. "They also add a sense of adventure. There's a surprise around every bend."

On the slope, with its sharp drainage, Laurie showcases seven different agaves, including the boldly striped *Agave americana medio-picta* and A.a. 'Marginata'. Around them are flowering shrubs ranging from California native wild lilac and lemonade berry to exotic Australian banksias and flashy pride of Madeira (*Echium candicans*). Feathery pindo palms and spiny cacti add texture while orange-red 'Sticks on Fire' euphorbia and inky 'Zwartkop' aeonium bring more rich color.

Tucked in here and there are yuccas, some of the "sentimental" plants relocated after the remodel from other sites around the house. Another, a red-flowering crown of thorns, is at home in the strolling garden, which also includes three 'Samuel Sommer' magnolia trees that one homeowner associates with mem-



Built-in seating offers views of planting beds that mix succulents with kangaroo paws, statice, grevilleas and other drought-tolerant shrubs and perennials. Behind the bench is a drift of scented jasmine.



Bold succulents add architecture and drama to the design. Among them are hot orange-flowered coral aloe with 'Sunburst' aeonium (left) and golden-edged *Furcraea selloa* 'Marginata' (right).



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ories of his childhood. "It's like having old friends around," Laurie says with a smile.

While each is unique, all strolling garden beds are unified by designs emphasizing sculptural plants. In the center bed, for example, four *Furcraea selloa marginata*, their serrated sword-like leaves striped in yellow, rise above a dozen varieties of smaller agaves. Around them are broad ribbons of magenta ice plant and 'Blue Chalk Sticks' senecio.

In another bed are three clumps of *Aloe alooides* famed for their tall cattail-like blooms of greenish-yellow flowers. Around them are pink-blooming 'Sunset' rockrose and the periwinkle trumpets of ground morning glory.

The ends of each bed are punctuated with flowering trees ranging from a 'Desert Museum' palo verde with its sunny yellow flowers to a purple trumpet tree with clusters of pink azalea-like blooms and an Illawarra flame tree prized for its springtime burst of brilliant-red flowers. Beneath them are aeoniums, echeverias, sedums, graptoverias and other succulents, many with oversize rosettes in confetti colors like pink, turquoise, lime and coral.

In one bed, iron fence panels recycled from the home's former entryway serve as garden accents. Two panels host lush passion vines — 'Purple Tiger' and 'Donna Brigham'; the third supports a purple-flowered Queen's wreath (*Petrea volubilis*).

The homeowners hope eventually to complement the sculptural plants with art, but at present they delight in the living sculptures that burst into view when the succulents bloom. Some like *Agave desmettiana* 'Variegata' shoot single stalks covered with flowers 10 feet into the air. Others like *Aloe spectabilis* hoist multi-branched candelabra tipped with glowing orange and gold flowers.

"It's an ever-changing garden," Laurie says, "a celebration of what nature offers us and a place where you can feel like a kid discovering the world again." ♦

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