

Years of thoughtful,  
self-taught designing pay off in  
a garden showcase of plants and art

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# Just Deserts

words & photographs by CHARLES MANN





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For many, the words “Sonoran Desert” conjure a vision of prickly cacti squatting amid scorching hot stretches of rough earth under a relentless sun. While that’s often not too far from the truth, visitors soon discover that the desert is also one of the most colorful and lively places in the country. There are hundreds of different species here—shrubs, cacti, trees, vines and wildflowers—and many display a flower power that can out-dazzle their more domesticated cousins.

“Neither Kelly nor I were gardeners, nor did we have any interest in gardening before arriving in Tucson,” Tag Merrick says. He and Kelly Frink grew up in Southern California, where he became a lawyer and she, a computer-graphics designer. After a stint in Dallas, they moved to Tucson in 1995. “We purchased our house because it was constructed of fired red adobe, a material unique to the Southwest. That the property would lend itself to desert gardening never entered our minds.”

Within a week of moving in, the two resolved to remove the swimming pool. “We didn’t realize at the time that it was our first act of gardening,” Merrick laughs. “Then the lawn had to go, leaving us with an empty space. Soon, we were busy learning about native plants and designing a planting scheme.”

The couple then had what they describe as their first “desert epiphany: Non-desert plants and landscapes, especially turf grass, do not belong in the desert.” Their metamorphosis had begun.

#### DESIGN-IT-YOURSELF

“At first we thought we needed professional help, but we quickly learned that we had the skill to design for ourselves, and that was a much more rewarding and personal experience,” Merrick says. “At the time, we did not envision the landscaping that covers our property

today, but even a small area like the backyard forced us to think about our yard in broader terms.”

One thing the couple’s 1.1-acre property had going for it was an abundance of desert vegetation. Land in the Southwest can be woefully barren, brutally fulfilling all the stereotypes of an unforgiving and impervious lunar hothouse. But as fate would have it, Merrick and Frink’s lot was blessed with a thicket of mature palo verde, mesquite and ironwood trees. The trees give the landscape a third dimension of volume. Their dense cover provides an understory of shady nooks, moving shadows and microclimates that allow dozens of other desert species to colonize and thrive. Merrick began carving the green thicket into a landscape.

“An overall theme is important for any garden,” he asserts. “At first we visited local botanical gardens and went through magazines, looking for things that appealed to us. We rejected a modern rectilinear style as being out of place for this setting and settled on an informal, undisciplined, ‘natural rustic’ idea that features meandering rocky paths, wood bridges, adobe and stucco walls, elevations and artwork.”

They’ve installed huge agaves (among them *Agave vilmoriniana* and *A. americana*) woolly Texas ranger (*Leucophyllum frutescens*), silver-blue desert spoon (*Dasyliirion wheeleri*) and yuccas of many shapes and forms. These, along with a virtual armada of prickly pears and other cacti, many with colloquial names like Mexican fencepost, fire barrel and Indian fig, became walls, clusters and screens that Merrick used to parse the thicket into what he likes to call “scenes.”

“A garden scene is like a photograph,” Merrick says. “One needs to take into account composition, balance, proportion, even light. Some are morning scenes and some are evening scenes. Each garden area is a separate and stand-alone composition, much like what a set de-

## Don’t Fight The Desert | Tag Merrick’s desert & design tips

The desert is boiling hot in the summer and freezing cold in the winter. It is full of spiny, prickly, gnarly plants and trees with funny, distorted shapes that fit perfectly with the harsh, dry, rock-strewn environment. I tell people to keep those attributes in mind when they design or build a desert garden. Leave the wisteria and boxwood plants for East Coast gardens. And remember these four principles—which can apply wherever you may garden:

- 1 Remember that your garden is like a photograph.** Bring the focal point to the front, don’t clutter the foreground and provide a background that doesn’t overwhelm. Use color sparingly but effectively. A painted stucco wall can be a stand-out in an otherwise dull garden.
- 2 Nature is random.** Don’t space plants evenly in the garden; use groupings, in multiples of odd numbers. For interest, add an anomaly, like a metal sculpture.
- 3 Remain faithful to your overall design theme.** Don’t stick a pink Victorian birdbath in the middle of a contemporary garden.
- 4 Select plants that have a proven history of survival and success in the local environment.** (For us that means locally native plants, succulents and other desert-adapted plants.) Local nurseries are the best source for sure-fire survivors.—Tag Merrick



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signer might create for a stage play,” he explains. “In addition to appropriate plants, we try to add unique pieces of art that enhance that scene. We might add a tall metal object to provide height or situate a bench in area that needs a focal point.”

#### A DESERT-GARDEN GALLERY

“Our garden serves two purposes,” Merrick says. “We wanted to provide an oasis filled with desert plants where we can walk, sit, contemplate and generally enjoy the surprising variety of the desert landscape, and secondly, to provide a gallery for the artwork that Kelly and I enjoy creating.”

While Merrick concentrates on the overall layout, scene design and structures, Frink brings her graphic-arts and creative skills to bear. Although many Tucson landscapes are likewise packed with a dazzling variety of shapes and colors, Frink’s art takes their garden to another level altogether.

A walk through the pair’s desert-garden gallery is a unique experience. The landscape has a sort of Alice-in-the-Desertland sensibility. The indigenous trees and the thicket, along with Merrick’s carefully placed plants, serve to divide and isolate the scenes. Some of the pathways leading from one area to another are almost like tunnels. These tunnels, however, are bright, sun-dappled, gauzy, gnarly and bushy, yet somehow muscular and Spartan, all at the same time. The wavy-leaved agaves, parasol yuccas and snaky ocotillos may just as well be popping out from an underwater tropical reef. There’s just the sun, the cerulean blue sky and the sawtooth edge of the distant Catalina Mountains to offer orientation.

Frink has populated the entire property with artwork. Her handmade treasures abound, tucked into cozy coves among colored chairs, nestled on the ground or ensconced in the trees. One of her signature creations is a collection of square posts that she’s embellished with all types of found items. Each “totem,” as she calls them, stands at one of the 22 hose bibs that Merrick has installed throughout the property, and they function like landmarks, marking the way around the labyrinth. Frink works out of a studio shed that Merrick built for her. It bulges with trinkets, yard-sale goodies, hardware, bric-a-brac, fasteners and tools. There, she fashions unique constructions that suit her artist’s whimsy. Merrick, too, has a craftsman side, welding up screens, gates and quirky sculptures from metal scraps and stock.

“We have built out all of the space available to us, so now our task is to maintain and improve the areas we have,” Merrick muses. “Lately, we have been editing our garden scenes, removing plants that grew too big, trimming back the ones that are blocking a pathway or that simply look wrong. We work one garden area at a time until we are happy with the result, then move to another. I suppose that once we revise all the gardens we will start over again.”

He glances at his partner and pauses for a moment to reflect. “After 14 years in Tucson, we cannot imagine living anywhere else,” he says. “The abundant sunshine, crystal clear nights and emphasis on outdoor living are perfect for us.”

**CHARLES MANN** is a garden photographer based in Santa Fe, N.M.



# TOC?

