

SANTA BARBARA

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SPIKE!

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at East Beach

Lush, Flourishing
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Life as a Mexican
Immigrant—An Interview
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Remembering
Michael Gonzales:
"The Father of Solstice"

Mediterranean Magic

By Joan Bolton

A HUMMINGBIRD, ITS Iridescent feathers glistening in the sunlight, darts from one scarlet bloom to another. Nearby, honeybees alight on shrubs blanketed in lavender blossoms. Throughout

this verdant garden, small, living things hum, buzz, creep and go about their daily routines against a backdrop of color and greenery.

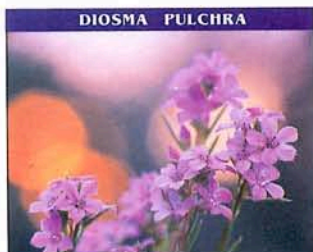
This scene is a dramatic contrast to the parched landscapes of the South Coast. It is one of a number of thriving gardens sprinkled among the many faded patches. When taking refuge within their borders, one may easily forget the unpleasantly

brown neighboring properties, the result of a full-scale drought that has recently gripped our county.

These special gardens are drought-tolerant landscapes, or xeriscapes. They require little or no watering during most of the year and take on a variety of shapes, textures, forms and hues. Their unifying theme lies in the plants' ability to grow vigorously with little or no water. Even in the driest periods of summer, they may need no more than a single deep soak a month.

Although environmentally conscious people have been installing these landscapes for years, many people have been slow to make the change. The drought is a major incentive. Endless gardens of dead and dying vegetation are tarnishing Santa Barbara's paradisaean reputation. On a more personal level, watching one's own lawn, flowers and shrubs shrivel into drabness is demoralizing to even the most casual gardener. The alternative—using more than one's water allocation, then shelling out hundreds of dollars in fines—is hardly reasonable and is often illegal.

To the uninitiated, the term "drought tolerant" often evokes the image of a few cacti stuck in white gravel. That image is a far cry from the attractive and colorful drought-tolerant gardens that are popping up all over Santa Barbara. Increasingly, people are ripping out lawns and other water-guzzling growth, then replacing them with native or exotic plants that are better suited to our Mediterranean climate of cool, wet winters and warm, dry summers. Owners of new homes are also blending drought-tolerant plants with oak-studded, natural landscapes and installing so-



DIOSMA PULCHRA

PHOTOS BY JÜRGEN HILMER

Dennis Shaw had two main things in mind when he designed the landscape for this Mediterranean-style home in Montecito: the owners' desire to conserve water and the area's heavy exposure to sunlight.

Shaw chose plants from Mediterranean climates for their colors and because they suited the architecture.

He ended up creating "rooms of color."





VERBASCUM BOMBYCIFERUM



phisticated irrigation systems.

The choices are astounding. Specialty nurseries are full of new drought-tolerant plants from around the world. Local landscape designers, architects and contractors say that despite the serious implications of the water shortage—and despite giving up some popular thirsty plants, such as fuchsias and azaleas—this is an exhilarating time for horticulturists and landscapers.

“There are so many beautiful plants,” says landscape architect Katie O’Reilly Rogers. “For every high-water-use plant, I can substitute a low-water-use plant that will serve the exact same function with the exact same color.”

In her fourth year as a member of Santa Barbara’s Architectural Board of Review, Rogers helped write the city’s new landscaping standards, which ban lawns in all new commercial projects and limit turf and other thirsty plants to no more than 20 percent of the landscaping around new residences.

Like all the experts, Rogers points to lawns as the worst culprit. The numbers are sobering: an acre of turf generally consumes two to three acre feet of water per year; mature, drought-tolerant plants covering the same area typically require no more than one acre foot per year.

In renovating landscapes, Rogers’ axe first falls at the curb. “There is absolutely no reason to have a lawn in a front yard,” she declares. Rogers ticks off a lawn’s high water use; expensive, time-consuming maintenance; and monotony to substantiate her claim.

“Lawn is one color and one texture,” she says. “Put in plants that are fascinating so that you’ll want to be in the garden.”

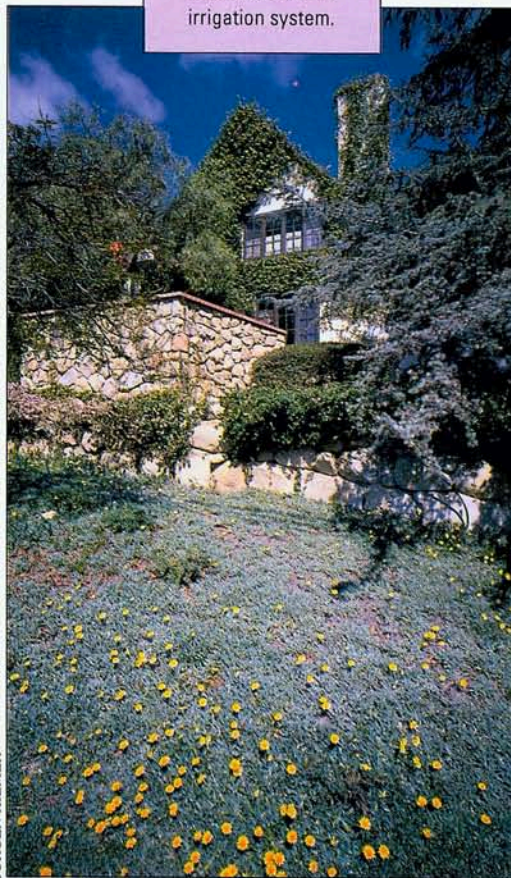
That is not to say Rogers completely does away with lawns. But she relegates them to small, back-yard play areas.

Rogers recently began working for landscape architect George Girvin, whose clients generally spend \$300,000 to \$1.5 million to landscape new homes or redesign gardens. (His firm also designs or reestablishes native vegetation in large, public spaces, including Las Positas Park and the Bird Refuge.)

Girvin allows that some clients “really like the feeling of an expansive lawn. If they were brought up in the Northwest or back East, landscape to them is that large, vast lawn.”

For people who are facing horrendous fines, yet are unwilling to remove sweeping vistas of turf, Girvin suggests withholding the water altogether. In wetter times, he explains, “they can go

Left: Planted in 1983, this simple, Japanese-style garden is one of two drought-tolerant gardens designed by Isabelle Greene for this Montecito home. Below: Susan Van Atta used blue-grey ground cover to extend the color of the existing cedar tree, and juniper, adding to the property’s “piney feeling.” The landscape has no irrigation system.



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back, thatch the lawn, reseed it, mulch it and it will come back.”

Girvin’s other approach is probably more attractive to homeowners. Girvin divvies the landscape into three water-use categories: low for natives and succulents on drip irrigation; medium for many ground covers, shrubs and trees; and high for turf. “The tradeoff is that the more lawn you have, the less water you’re going to have for the other areas,” he explains.

Girvin selects plants based on the owners’ preferences, topography and the architecture.

“We try to design gardens where we borrow from the surrounding landscape,” he says. “If you have a view of the mountains and that view includes some great rock outcroppings, we bring the same rock outcroppings into the garden to make it feel like the garden is much bigger.”

In addition to the boulders and terrain that nature may have provided, Girvin retains or brings in native oak, manzanita and *ceanothus*. These rugged trees and shrubs shrug off pests and diseases and require little supplemental watering or upkeep.

“Half the gardens we do, people take care of themselves,” Girvin says. “It may cost them up front, where they solve drainage problems, put in a proper irrigation system with a controller, amend their soils properly and select the right plant material. . . . If those things are done properly at the beginning, then the garden matures really well. You’re not selecting plant material that you have to clip, trim, mow, mulch and water heavily.”

Drip irrigation is a key element of drought-tolerant gardening. It releases a slow, steady flow of water to provide

the deep soak that drought-tolerant plants need to help their roots penetrate the ground. Emitters lie above ground, directly around each plant: the technique uses far less water than above-ground sprinklers, which indiscriminately irrigate bare earth between plants. The resulting dry spots also discourage weeds from sprouting before the plants fill in.

Not all drip systems are the mess of unsightly, black tubes crisscrossing the earth that one might imagine. Gardeners commonly bury the tubing or cover it with mulch. Other than flourishing plants, little evidence of watering exists.

Landscape architect Susan Van Atta also relies on drip irrigation in her residential and commercial designs. She says mid-range landscape architects typically charge homeowners \$50 to \$75 per hour or bill a flat project rate, while commercial fees are





This drought-tolerant garden was planted in 1984 on the same property as the Japanese-style garden. Using subtle-colored plantings, Isabelle Greene created eye-pleasing textures and patterns in this terraced landscape, designed to be viewed from the house, which sits above it. The stones that Greene incorporated into one portion of the landscape are intended to represent a running stream.

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LAVENDER STOECHAS



usually higher. Landscape architects must pass a licensing examination following several years of extensive schooling and practical experience. They often design large, commercial projects and deal with structural problems, such as slope stability and retaining walls. Van Atta specializes in drought-tolerant, California native plants, which she actively promotes. She gives lectures at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden and Goleta Water District's annual

xeriscape conferences, and serves as president of the Community Environmental Council's board of directors.

"It's not a crusade thing for me," she insists. "It has to do more with appropriate landscaping, since there are just countless beautiful plant materials that do well in our normal climate."

Van Atta often uses *ceanothus*, manzanita and Western redbud. "I feel like I really know them because I've done so much hiking and have seen them growing where they grow normally," she says. "They can be incorporated into anything. I don't use them to create the native landscape, necessarily."

Van Atta says that the trend toward drought-tolerant plants has made her work easier because wholesale nurseries are propagating more California natives than ever. She doubts, however, that retail nurseries will completely change over.

"Natives don't look good in containers for very long," Van Atta explains. "One of the reasons they're drought tolerant is that they have very well-developed root systems that fill a container with little top growth showing."

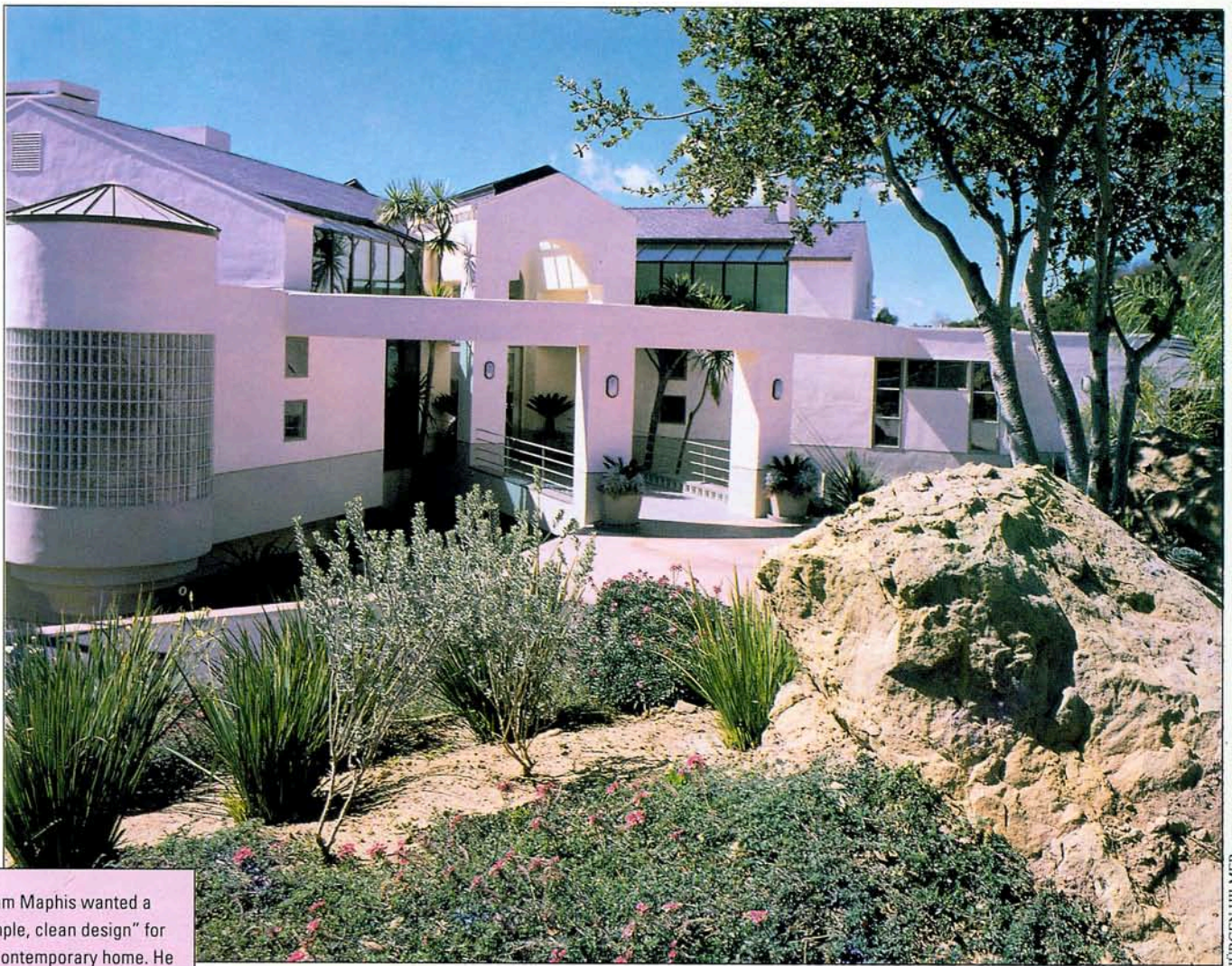
But given a proper home—good soil, drip irrigation and mulch—these tiny plants should fill out just as well as the thirsty plants that look pretty at the outset.

For areas such as lawns, where sprinklers are still a must, proper water management goes a long way toward cutting consumption, according to Van Atta. "If your sprinklers come on at night or when you are gone, a broken head can be shooting out geysers and you may not realize it."

Landscape contractor Owen Dell agrees that the sprinkler problem is widespread. "The best sprinkler system, head to head coverage, perfectly designed, no wind factor, is going to be 70 percent efficient," he claims. "The worst? Maybe 30 percent, 20 percent. . . . You would do better to go out and hand water in some cases."

As an example of the importance of good sprinkler-system management, Dell cites clients from Montecito who paid \$2,000

WM. B. DEWEY



Sam Maphis wanted a "simple, clean design" for this contemporary home. He created a lush oasis near the house and used drought-tolerant plantings in the outskirts.

in fines. They had been watering two or three times a week, Dell remarks, "just drenching the property."

Yet the gardens contained mature, drought-tolerant juniper, bougainvillea and oleander. Dell recalls, "I just went in and turned off the [sprinkler] clocks." In no time, the bill dropped to less than \$40. "That's management. They already had a xeriscape."

As owner of County Landscape & Supply, Dell has been designing and installing drought-tolerant gardens for nearly twenty years. Landscape contractors are licensed to install irrigation, lighting, plants and certain garden structures, usually for residences. For wholesale revisions of a "typical" yard, including removing lawn, Dell estimates that costs start at two to three dollars per square foot.

"I have a reputation as the guy who goes out and kills lawns," Dell says with a grin, adding that he has gone from putting in several hundred lawns a year during wetter times to only two small lawns last year.

"Landscaping was always just an aesthetic thing," Dell continues. "All of a sudden, we're running our business based on helping people to survive economically and keep their property values up and still have a yard."

For starters, Dell recommends turning off all sprinkler clocks, then activating the systems only when the plants show stress.

"For example, *achillea*, the yarrow, will start to wilt and lose some of its sheen," Dell explains. "With turf, if you walk across it and turn around and your footprints haven't sprung back up, then that lawn is thirsty."

Drought-tolerant plants with leathery leaves need water when their older leaves turn yellow or drop off. "Other plants will turn their leaves in and away from the sun. Or the leaves will fold in on one another," Dell adds.

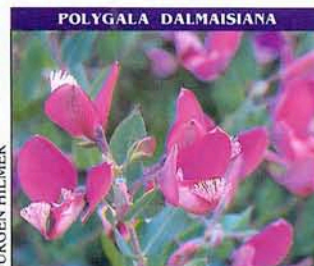
Landscape designer Lynn Woodbury notes additional ways that xerophytic plants have adapted to drought. Some have fuzzy leaves, which retain water, thus boosting the humidity directly around the plant and slowing water loss. Silver plants reflect sunlight, which keeps the leaves cooler and reduces their need for water.

Woodbury specializes in succulents and other drought-tolerant plants. She teaches at the Botanic Garden and through Adult Education. Like Dell, she generally renovates gardens for existing homes. Woodbury estimates that her project fees generally start at \$2,000. Her clients often help with the work to reduce overall costs. As a designer, Woodbury is not licensed and works only with plant material—she refers irrigation, walkways and other structural projects to landscape contractors or architects.

Woodbury strives for year-round color, sometimes changing the color scheme during different seasons. "In summer, your emphasis might be on yellow and purple plants and then in win-



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ter, it might be shades of pink and lavender," she says. "You get a better sense of the changing seasons. Instead of just brown grass or green grass, depending on if it's winter or spring."

People are pleasantly surprised to discover the variety of turf alternatives, Woodbury points out. "I do a lot of theme gardens—things like cut-flower gardens, succulent gardens, hummingbird gardens and edible gardens. They can all be drought tolerant."

Even tropical landscapes can be water conserving. Woodbury sometimes starts with colorful bougainvillea or bird of paradise, then adds shrubs, trees and vines with large leaves and green foliage, staying away from the more xerophytic-looking silver or blue plants.

As for succulents, she adds that some clients shy away because of stickers. "People are afraid of things like prickly pears and giant agaves with good reason." Instead, Woodbury chooses smaller, more manageable plants, or places those that might prick and sting away from paths or patios.

Woodbury stresses proper soil preparation. "A lot of drought-tolerant plants are drought tolerant because they're able to put down a good, strong, deep root system," Woodbury says. "If they can't get through the soil for whatever reason—poor nutrition, lack of water or heavy soil—they're never going to be able to develop that root system. And you may indeed not have a drought-tolerant plant."

Creating fertile soil that drains well and allows deep root development should be every local gardener's primary goal. In sandy soils, the goal is to get the soil to hold the moisture a bit longer. In clay, the goal is to break up the soil to allow the roots to breathe.

Coping with the drought has proven difficult. In the past, rolling out a sod lawn and plopping in a few azaleas or other thirsty ornamentals around the edges required little work and gave instant gratification.

Now that nature has denied us that instant gratification, converting a landscape to a garden filled with appropriate plants seems a sensible solution. But the same vast selection of plants that excites horticulturists may bewilder someone who simply



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wants to conserve water.

Several forms of help are inexpensive: local water districts provide free pamphlets, while the Botanic Garden and Adult Education offer lectures and classes for a nominal fee.

But the actual installation of a drought-tolerant garden, beyond letting the lawn turn brown or adjusting watering habits, can be costly and complicated. Having a lush Santa Barbara landscape now exacts a price.

Yet as many people have already discovered, the price is well worth it.

Installing a xeriscape has enabled them to conserve water as well as improve their gardens and gain outdoor living space. These forerunners in what the experts proclaim is the future of Santa Barbara horticulture are setting fine examples for drought-conscious residents.

Frequent contributor Joan Bolton recently ripped out her Bermuda lawn and installed a drought-tolerant front yard.

Above left: Isabelle Greene designed this colorful, water-conserving landscape for Montecito Water District's demonstration garden. Above: The area's heavy winds and poor soil were Owen Dell's primary considerations when planting this spa area. He used many unusual and imported drought-tolerant plants around the boulder outcroppings.