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Make-Over Magic

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Cliffhanger

*Mother Nature intervenes
during the renovation of a hillside garden*

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Opposite: Copper Mountain boulders serve as the foundation for a poolside waterfall at the home of Bill and Karen Clements. Potted annuals that the homeowner changes out

seasonally bring color and texture to the south-facing deck. **Above:** A 5-foot-by-7-foot handcrafted Mexican tile mural adorns an outdoor patio wall.



MOVING TO A NEW HOME AFTER 32 years in the Encanto-Palmcroft Historic District offered Karen and Bill Clements a change of environment and the chance to enjoy a different kind of plant palette. They left behind citrus trees, roses, and the traditional flower beds of the city for a dramatic desert canyon property in the Phoenix Mountain Preserve.

For Karen, who says she used to view “cacti” and “garden” as mutually exclusive terms, the idea of creating a drought-tolerant garden took a little getting used to. But landscape architect Greg Trutza, who had designed the couple’s previous yard, convinced her to combine elements from the desert with Mediterranean-influenced vegetation. “Greg helped us understand the beauty of the desert,” Karen says. “Without his influence and that of my garden club, I just would have put in grass.”

When Trutza first saw the steep hillside property, it was planted with palm trees, bougainvilleas, and shrubs manicured into unnatural shapes. The front and back patios lacked space and needed to be expanded and enhanced. The landscape architect envisioned a “precipice garden overlooking the Valley, carved out of the mountain with the drama of a sheer cliff rising behind it.” And he saw opportunities to create theme gardens throughout the property.

As the new landscape began to take shape, however, a landslide brought work to a halt. “Even though the hillside looks monolithic, water seeps into the rock,” explains Bill. “And too much rain made the mountain collapse.” An emergency permit allowed the hillside to be restored, although driveway pavers had to be removed so they wouldn’t be ground into gravel under tractor treads. A 6-foot retaining wall was constructed to hold back the hillside before the pavers were re-laid.

BEFORE





This photo: Rocks that fell from the Phoenix Mountain Preserve during renovation later were incorporated around the perimeter of the pool. Planting areas then were integrated behind the water feature after two landslides cleared the way for the unplanned garden beds. Geraniums at left bloom within the curve of the former hot tub.



Above: A view from the rock waterfall toward the back patio reveals the extensive stonework and plant material of the garden. Under the covered patio, outdoor furniture provides a comfortable place to enjoy views of the Phoenix skyline. **Opposite top and bottom:** Olive and flowering pear trees shade the entrance patio, where agaves, white Lady Banks' roses and privet thrive. A circular window in a low wall is accented with wrought iron.

Work resumed, then another landslide occurred, filling the pool with shale. This time, the rocks donated by the mountain were re-used in the landscape. Some went to driveway walls, where they added to the natural rock-garden effect begun by the prior owners. Others were used to edge the pool and create planting pockets where trailing indigo bush, golden barrel cacti, coral crown of thorns and several kinds of agaves were installed. In spring, yellow blooms of palo verde and brittlebush blend with yellow bells, golden lantana and orange jubilee tucked behind the waterfall.

The enlarged back patio now provides a quiet spot for relaxing, dining, and enjoying views of the Phoenix skyline. Orange and raspberry-pink bougainvilleas make a colorful backdrop for large custom-made stone pots that dot the grounds.

"Sitting here at sunset, listening to the waterfall, and looking up at the mountain is wonderful," says Bill.

In only two years, the couple's Mediterranean precipice garden has become an intimately landscaped theater from which to enjoy the drama of the natural surroundings. □

See Resource Guide.



SAGE ADVICE

- For instant gratification, go with containers, Karen advises. She changes hers out seasonally. "They're quick and easy."
- When it comes to re-vegetating, be patient. "Over time, your garden will look as though it has been there forever," she notes.
- "Don't be overly attached to what's existing," advises landscape architect Greg Trutza. "The most successful projects are those where you think out of the box, and rethink elements that no longer serve the overall goal."