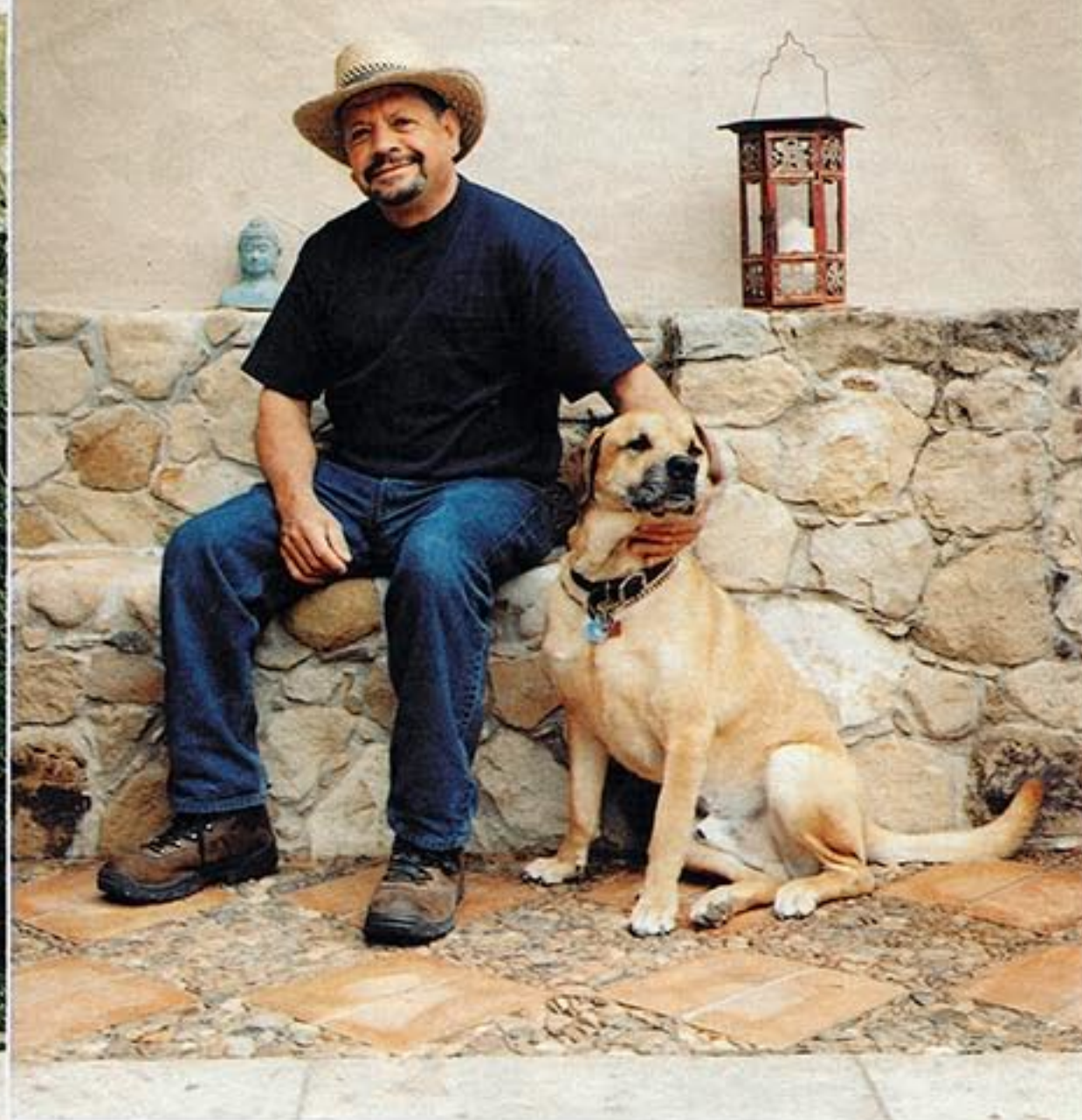




Stonemason Javier Valdivia, right, added sandstone accents to a stairway leading from the pool terrace to the deck at the Santa Monica home of actress Marg Helgenberger. Valdivia credits his hometown in Jalisco for his love of stone: "It was full of wonderful stone houses, cobble streets. When the sun hit those streets, you saw diamonds."



## set in stone

Javier Valdivia Takes Inspiration From His Native Mexico to Create Garden Paths, Walls and Terraces

BY SUSAN HEEGER | PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALLEN SCOTT

BENEATH A STRAW HAT WITH AN UP-turned brim, Javier Valdivia's face shows his simple pleasure in sitting awhile on a stone bench of his own making, work boots planted on river-rock paving, hands set squarely on his knees. Soon, though, those hands are

on the move, sliding out unconsciously along the seat, as if unable to keep themselves from feeling the mortared joints and remembering the weight of individual boulders, each plucked, years ago, from a canyon or a stream.

"I love to think about what an old

stone's been through," says Valdivia, a veteran Mexican-born mason who grew up watching his father turn rock piles into field walls on cattle ranches. "Everything shows on the stone's face: the pressure of water, cold weather, heat, how it's been kicked around and

fought to come up to the surface."

Such marks of character, he believes, etch the surfaces of a garden with something precious and alive. And if stonework creates a garden's bones—the walks, the walls, the lines that contain and control planting—Valdivia's patterned paths and uneven walls are more elaborate than most. Not surprisingly, his favorite stones have odd shapes, unusual colors or striking ruts and scrapes that make them stand out in a crowd. Before setting them, he lays them out, mixes them up, lets them tell him where they belong. "When I look at a rock and it looks back at me, I know I've got it right," he says.

Valdivia spent his first 18 years in the town of Valle de Guadalupe in Jalisco. He credits his father, for whom he worked as a helper after school, and the place itself as his first imaginative inspirations. "It was full of wonderful stone houses, a beautiful church that was my museum, cobbled streets. When the sun lit those streets, you saw diamonds."

The local stone was pink cantera, which he found on walks, scattered along riverbeds in loose collages that he carried in his mind for years. Then, in the late 1970s, he followed his family from Mexico to Santa Monica, where his father, working as a landscaper, introduced him to an Italian mason who needed an apprentice. Over the next seven years, Valdivia learned to set tile, lay bricks and pour concrete, applying his masonry skills to the tasks of knocking out driveways and pool decks. But all the while he yearned, he says, to "do more than just make a living, get the job done. I had a dream of bringing Mexico—my memories of how it looked and felt—to this world that

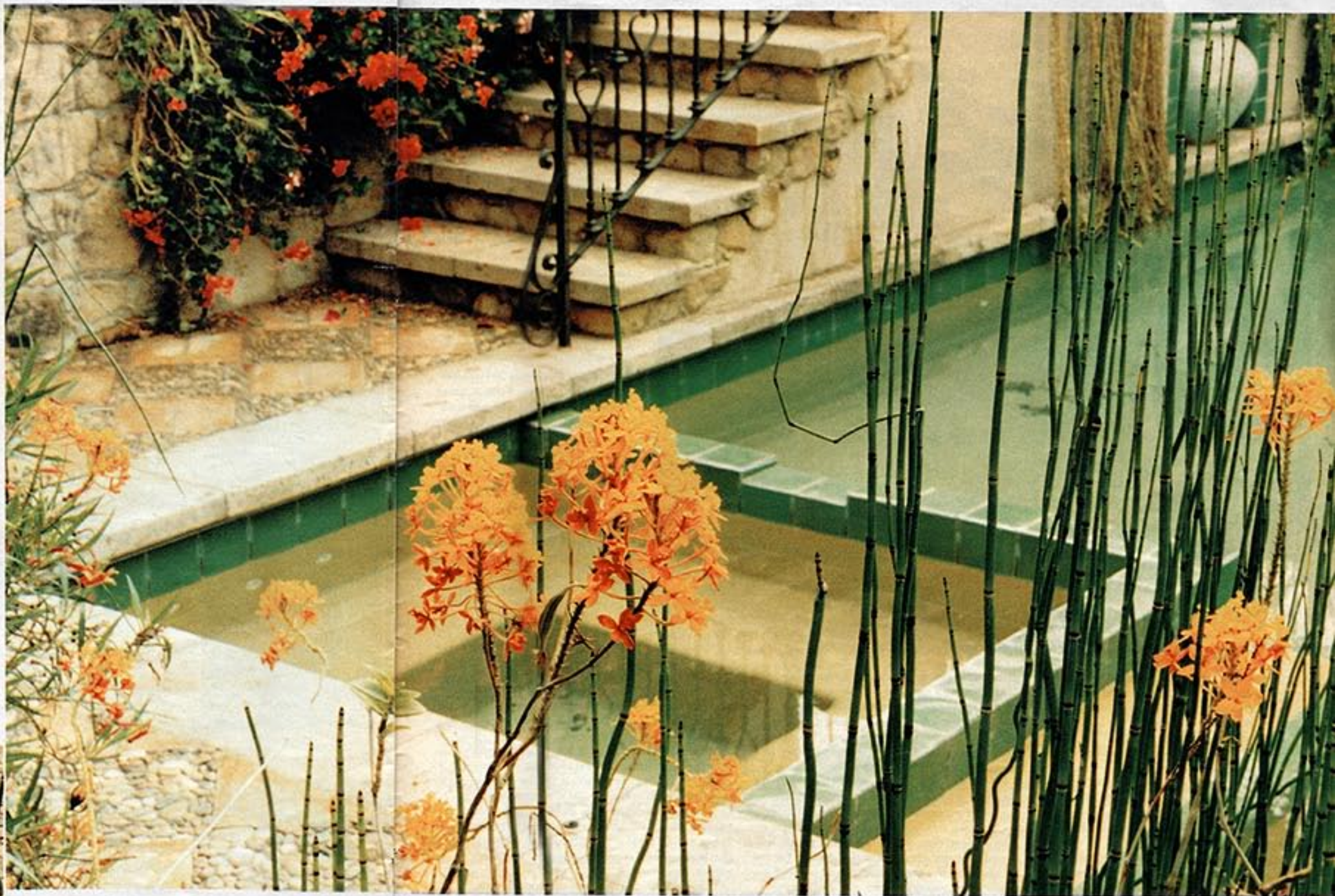
was new to me."

He ventured out on his own, printing up business cards, which he took to a tile shop hoping to win customers who wanted craftsmanship, not just fill-in-the-blanks concrete. And slowly, he did. One of those early clients was also a client of Mary Effron, a Santa Monica-based landscape designer known for vivid textural gardens around Spanish-style homes. She and Valdivia began collaborating, and in 1989 they married. They have two children, Alex, 13, and Cody, 11. "We see things the same way," Valdivia says of their partnership, which includes a reverence for history and timeworn places.

In many Effron-designed gardens, Valdivia has implemented intricate stonework vignettes: an entry paving with a mosaic sun whose pebbled rays invite visitors through a gate; a rocky, free-form stream that links a swimming pool with a Jacuzzi; a checkered path that mixes multicolored river rock with sawed halves of Saltillo tiles.

But Valdivia works with others beside his wife, on projects ranging in scope from a single stone walk to a garden's entire "hardscape," such as pool patios, terraces and surrounding walls. Costs for his craftsmanship can range from hundreds to many thousands of dollars, but for a lot of people, he says, cost is not as big an obstacle as time. A job with multiple parts can take six months or more, since Valdivia works alone, using one or possibly two helpers. "To hire me, you need patience," he says. "My worst enemy is time."

On the other hand, he adds, "What I make is going to last. I'm trying to build for the future. It's my hope that stone will be the last thing on this earth to disappear." <



Valdivia used a checkerboard pattern of river rock and Saltillo tiles around the border of Heigenberger's pool, left and above. He and wife Mary Effron, a landscape designer, share a reverence for history and timeworn places, he says.