

## what's for desert?

A California garden of aloes and agaves showcases the diversity of surprising—and virtually indestructible—succulent plants.

In the West, with its embarrassment of planting riches, succulents sometimes figure as a last resort. Soil's bad, water's tight, you haven't got a spare moment to mow a lawn—plant cactus.

That was David Gale's thinking after eight years of staring at the dirt in front

of his Venice, California, home. In 1991, it was drought time around the state, and, worse, the soil in his yard was full of heavy clay. His demanding work as a metal artist ruled out high-maintenance blooms anyway, and his solution—spiky agave plants—went

well on his urban street, with its heavy traffic. They discouraged vandals and suited him fine. "I'd forget to water," he remembers. "No problem." He also appreciated the subtle color of the plants—a silver blue that enhanced his stark gray, fortresslike building.

What Gale didn't count on was how the tough guys would win him over. One succulent soon led to others—and a medley of variations on a theme. He discovered yellow agaves with green stripes, green agaves with yellow stripes and rosette-shaped agaves, as well as splayed aloes and stringy yuccas.

His whole understated composition—arranged in tiers to give the flat lot depth—has a quality of arrested motion that Gale loves. "The garden's alive, but you can hardly tell. The plants are like sculpture, rigid and formal but wildly shaped."

Those shapes play off each other and additional plants Gale mixed in with the help of Santa Monica garden designer Mary Effron. A durable blue wild rye grass (*Elymus condensatus* 'canyon prince') thrives in a vulnerable strip along the sidewalk (below, at left); a tree aloe (*Aloe bainesii*) provides height against the house; three bottlebrush trees (*Callistemon citrinus*) contribute red flowers and rustling leaves—and draw hummingbirds too.

All Gale has to do is watch the garden grow. "The dirt's terrible," he concedes. "It's awfully dry here, and it's too cold, but everything's happy." As for himself, he no longer thinks of the plants as "defensive objects." Now, he says, "I just like the way they look." **MI**

by Susan Heeger

Metal artist David Gale's Santa Monica garden, below, is composed entirely of succulent plants, such as yellow-edged *Agave americana* (top, left) and *Aloe bainesii*, a tree aloe, surrounded by a variety of common agaves (top, right).

