

Spanish lessons

This Southern California garden is Mediterranean to the core, and it's filled with planting ideas you can use

BY SHARON COHOON

■ A DREAM CLIENT, SAYS SANTA MONICA DESIGNER MARY EFFRON, IS "SOMEONE with a real sense of their home and an appreciation of their climate." And when all elements—from plants and paving to pots—work together to support a property's style, the result is a dream garden.

Take this classic Mediterranean garden, for instance. When its owner bought the Spanish-style house—built in the late 1920s—it was rich in handsome architectural details. But the garden around it was deadly dull. Thirsty turf grass carpeted the front; red bricks paved the back. Though she was not a gardener, the owner knew what she wanted: hard-scaping more appropriate for her house, plants better suited to a Mediterranean climate, and beautiful detailing.

Effron and her husband, Javier Valdivia, a contractor, delivered on all counts. Here's what makes the Spanish-style garden they created a perfect marriage with the house and the climate.

- An elevated terrace across the back of the house for outdoor living. The terrace's surface echoes the antique tile flooring inside the house.
- A lap pool that—thanks to its long, narrow shape and cobalt blue tiled surface—recalls the reflecting pools of Moorish-influenced gardens in southern Spain. The frieze along one end complements the '20s-era tiles that decorate the exterior of the house.
- A backyard that feels lush, with planters built into the terrace so plants grow close to the house. Flowering vines scramble up walls, billowy lavenders spill over the pool's edge, and potted plants soften hard surfaces and edges.
- A front yard filled with sculptural plants. Columnar cactus, satiny agave rosettes, and fleshy-fingered *Senecio mandraliscae* have replaced the lawn. Broad paths of decomposed granite between beds let visitors admire the prickly vegetative art from a safe distance. Though this is primarily a foliage

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LEFT: Typical Mediterranean plants—agave, lavender, pride of Madeira, flax—soften the edges of a backyard lap pool. TOP: Antique Mexican doors are used as a rustic garden gate. ABOVE: Mediterranean-style tiles cover the terrace.



garden, it's always splashed with some seasonal color; early spring, when pride of Madeira and California poppies are both in bloom, is the showiest period.

Effron is the first to admit that gardens in the late '20s, even those surrounding Spanish-style houses in California, weren't really like this. "This is how you *wish* they'd looked. But it took transplanted Easterners a long time to adjust to the West," she says. The owner doesn't care about any of that. "This garden says Spain," she explains. "It works with the house, it works with the sun, it works with the weather."

Core elements of a Mediterranean garden

A few lavenders and a couple of fan palms do not make a Mediterranean

garden. Here are the most important features.

Big patios, small lawn (or no lawn). In Mediterranean gardens, flat, open spaces are more likely to be devoted to people than turf grass, which isn't really at home in arid climates. These spaces are devoted instead to terraces, courtyards, outdoor dining rooms, and patios, and they're paved with level flooring suitable for tables and chairs—flagstone, tile, concrete, or decomposed granite.

Plants with character. Mediterranean weather may be mild, but its light is strong. Plants that look best under harsh sunlight have architectural shapes and heavy textures. Think of the thick leaves of agaves, the starchy blades of flax, and the

broad fans of palms. Soft-textured, often gray-leaved plants such as helichrysum, germander, and lavender are buffers between these bold personalities.

Fearless use of flower color. Forget pastel pink. Orange, red, and sun-drenched gold are more typical Mediterranean colors. Aloes and acacia bloom in early spring; trumpet vines and lion's tail flower in summer. Even the blues are stronger—lapis-lazuli blues—like the dramatic spikes of pride of Madeira.

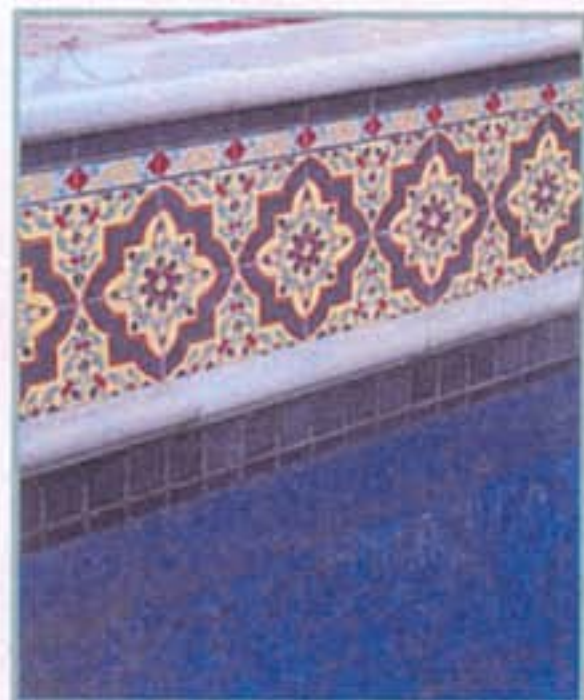
Aegean foliage colors. The mechanisms that make plants drought-tolerant—such as waxy or hairy leaf surfaces—affect foliage color. Pure greens are rare in Mediterranean plants. Olive greens, gray-greens, and blue-greens are more typical.



JENNIFER HANCOCK/ISTOCK

To accentuate the cobalt and aquamarines in existing tiles and in the new lap pool, the designers used plants with blue-green foliage extensively in this garden: *Agave attenuata*, *Lavandula heterophylla*, and *Senecio mandraliscae*, for example.

Containers as architecture. Pots, as used in the classic Mediterranean garden, have specific functions. A row of identical containers can act as a wall or room divider. And a solo urn or pot, with or without plants, often substitutes for sculpture. ♦



STEVEN GURTHEIN

LEFT: Containers filled with succulents bring the garden closer to the house. Vines, a palm tree, and large accent plants like flax grow in planting beds built into the terrace.

ABOVE: Blue pride of Madeira, contrasted with orange and red California poppies, stops traffic in front of this garden in spring. RIGHT: The same blue is repeated in the backyard's flowers and foliage, as well as in the tiles lining the pool. Design: Mary Effron and Javier Valdivia, Santa Monica.

