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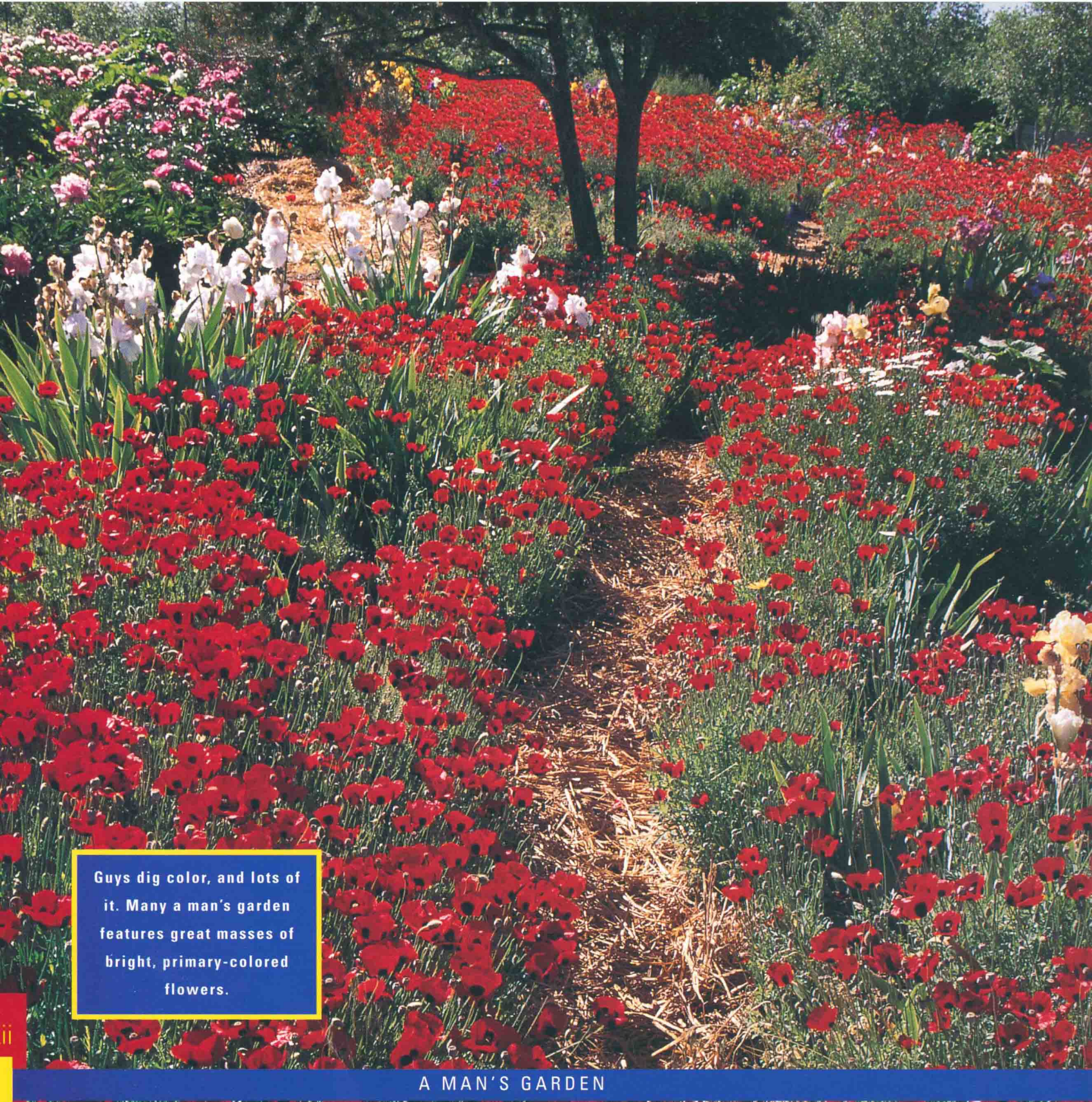
TO MY MOM, ROSEMARY,
who has lived her life in the company of gardening men

AND TO MY DAD, WARREN SR.,
who planted the love of gardening in me

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A M A N ' S G A R D E N



Guys dig color, and lots of it. Many a man's garden features great masses of bright, primary-colored flowers.

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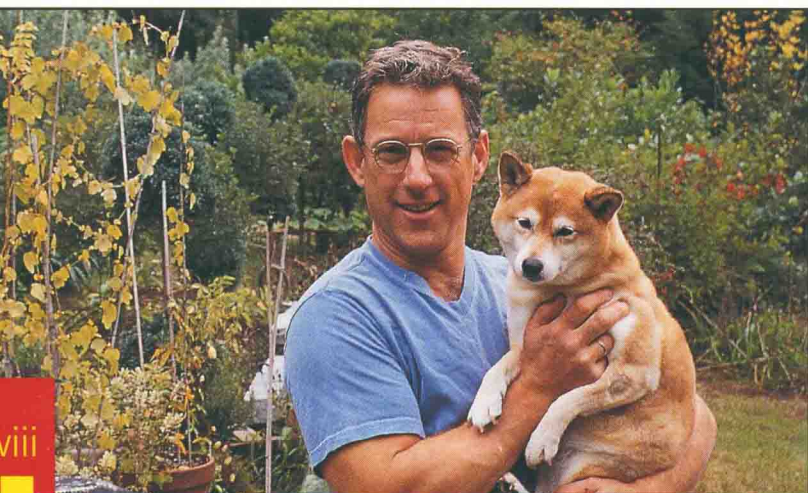
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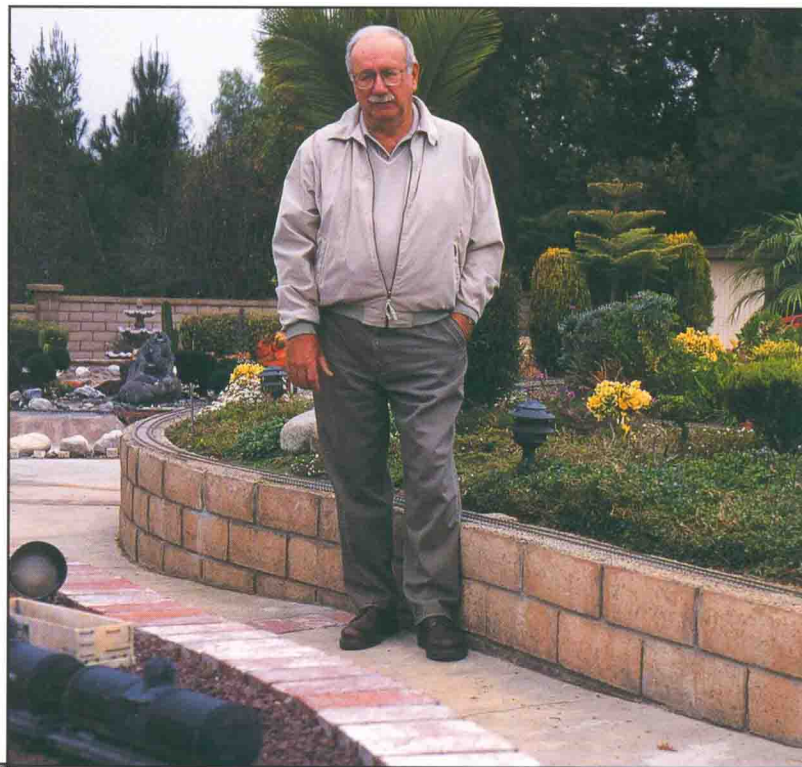
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INTRODUCTION

I'M TIRED OF BEING TOLD that gardening is woman's work. I don't like the way my buddies roll their eyes when I tell them I'd rather weed a border than watch a hockey game between Saskatoon and Moose Jaw, but there's no shame in being a gardening man. Farmers? Men. Landscape architects? Men. Golf-course greenskeepers? Men. Plant breeders? Men. How did the garden come to be seen as a woman's domain? It's not, you know. There are 36 million male gardeners in America, a strong cadre of real men with manly gardens. Granted, for many of them the landscape begins at the sidewalk and ends at the front steps, and in between there's nothing but green, green grass. Hauling out the mower every Saturday is the extent of their "gardening."

But plenty of men are real gardeners, who subscribe to a masculine style of planting. Is there such a thing as a man's garden? You can bet your last six-pack there is. In



Some men garden to build monuments to themselves and their masculine industriousness.

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INTRODUCTION

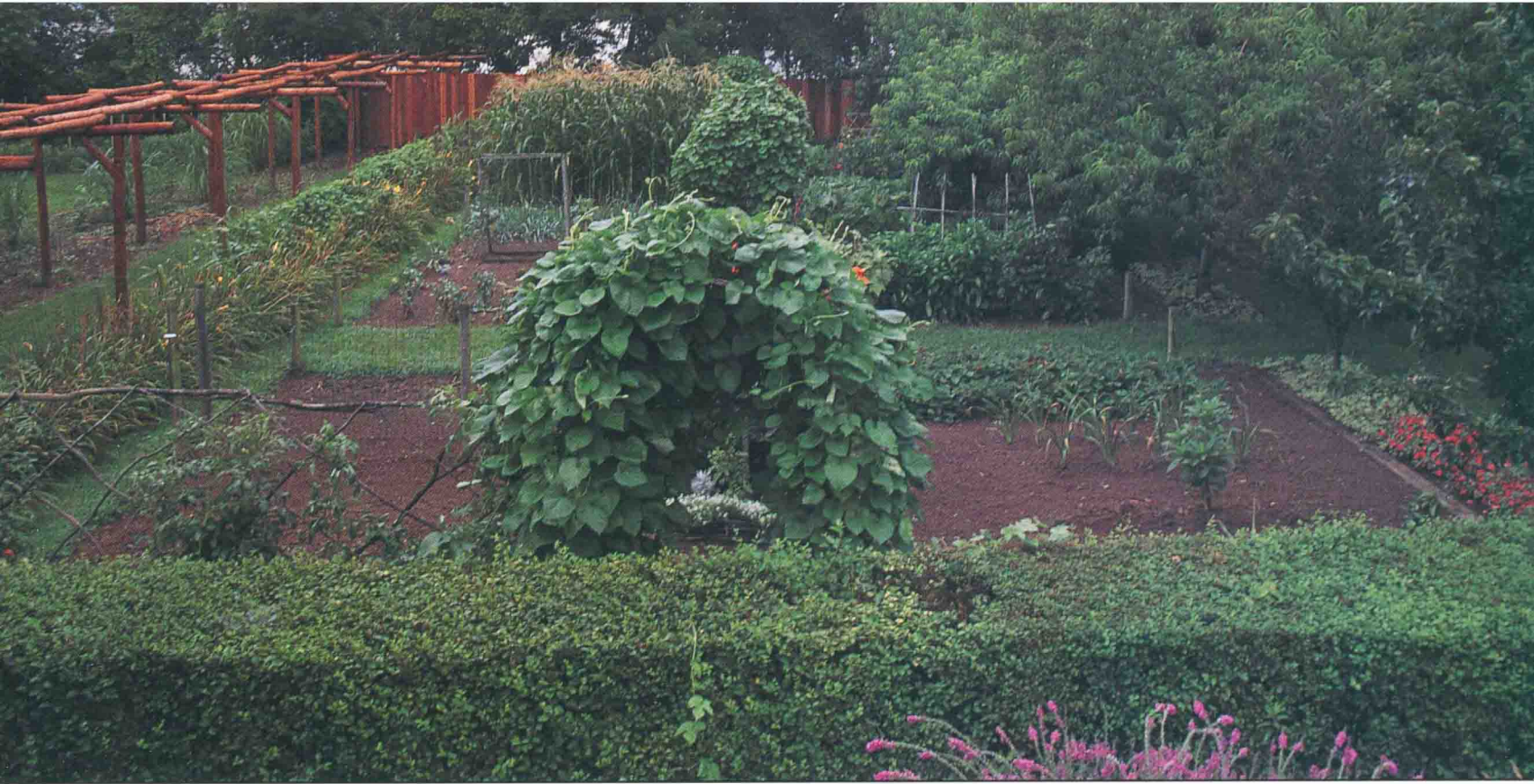
I'M TIRED OF BEING TOLD that gardening is woman's work. I don't like the way my buddies roll their eyes when I tell them I'd rather weed a border than watch a hockey game between Saskatoon and Moose Jaw, but there's no shame in being a gardening man. Farmers? Men. Landscape architects? Men. Golf-course greenskeepers? Men. Plant breeders? Men. How did the garden come to be seen as a woman's domain? It's not, you know. There are 36 million male gardeners in America, a strong cadre of real men with manly gardens. Granted, for many of them the landscape begins at the sidewalk and ends at the front steps, and in between there's nothing but green, green grass. Hauling out the mower every Saturday is the extent of their "gardening."

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The big, square, straight-row back-yard vegetable garden is classically a man's territory, where he can fulfill the need to provide for his family.

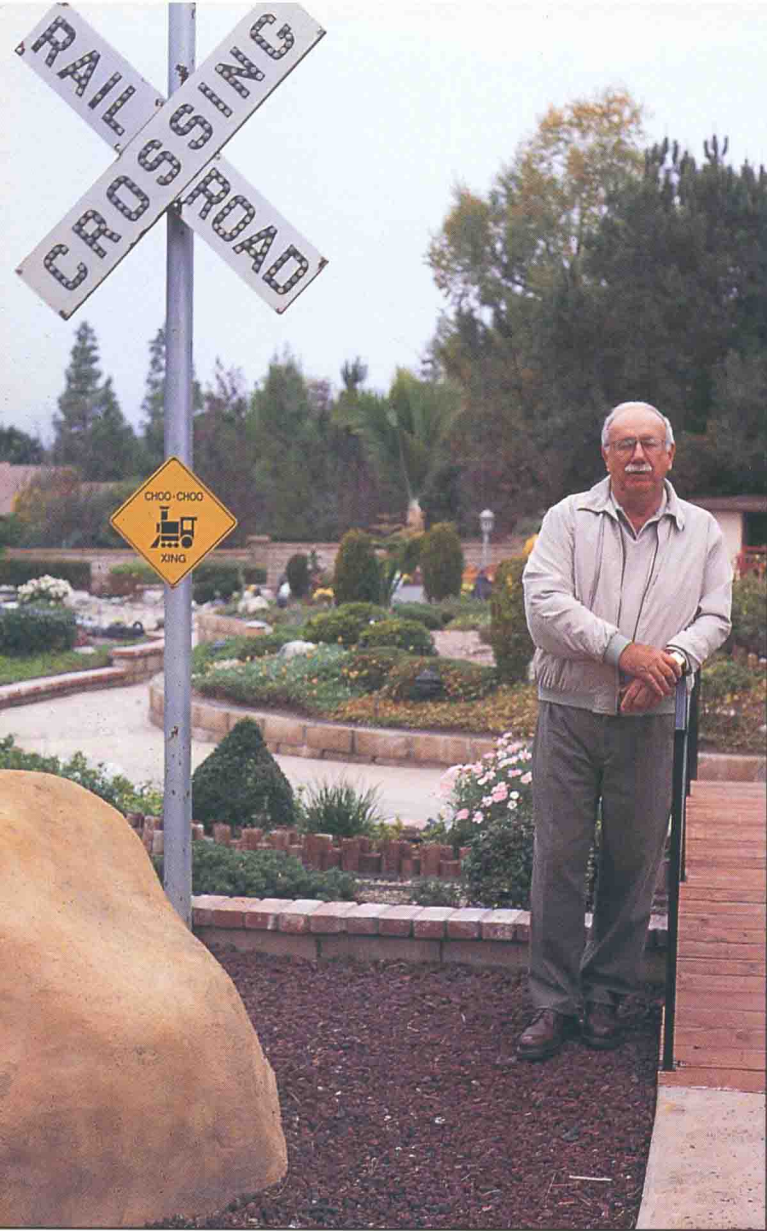
Many have decks and hammocks and built-in barbecue pits. There might be a bocce court, a putting green, or even a quiet corner where a man can sit and enjoy a cigar. A man's garden may have vegetables, and if it does, it certainly has tomatoes—monster tomatoes, the biggest on the block. It may have a tall and unruly flower border in a riot of colors. It probably has some old-fashioned, unfashionable flowers. It may have cactuses or hedges or a collection of roses or dahlias.

To me, the idea of testosterone in the garden seems natural. I grew up surrounded by gardening men. Well, they weren't exactly gardening. This was not a leisure-time activity or a hobby; it was serious business. These

guys were farmers—shirt-sleeves-rolled-up, cigarette-smoking, work-boot-wearing, wisecracking guys: my dad, my uncle, my cousins. The men worked the fields, the women kept house and planted little flower gardens beside the back door.

My father was the greatest influence on me. You had to take only one look at him to be assured that gardening was a manly activity. Six feet tall, 250 pounds, he was an all-city high school football player who attended Notre Dame on an athletic scholarship. In time, though, he gave up his scholarship to return home and help his mother run the family farm.

A man does his duty. He takes care of his family, he



Railroad gardening has caught on in a big way with men. It satisfies the urge to create a world of their own while allowing them to play with toys.

tion to ourselves. We may lack subtlety, but we like to think we're constant and low-maintenance.

Men also love exotics—cactus, palms, and orchids. We love the hunt involved in tracking down rare species. We love the challenge of growing plants out of their natural element. Most of all, we love the joy of showing them off.

Men love lawns and hedges—any plant that needs to be chopped, pruned, and trimmed. We like the feeling of power that comes from hacking away at a plant to keep it under control.

Men love vegetables. We love the idea of growing our own food, even if that food is four hundred pounds of zucchini and a couple of ears of corn. We love the idea that we are providers. Growing vegetables is worthwhile and manly because we are putting food on the table for our family, hearkening back to an earlier time in our country.

The United States began as an agrarian nation, which may explain why the tradition of hobby gardening for men is not as strong here as it is in Europe. In our not too distant past, gardening meant farming, and farming was hard work, a hardscrabble existence. You didn't grow plants for relaxation unless you belonged to the privileged class. Farming has been seen as a form of labor to rise above, the agrarian life something to escape from. For hundreds of years American farmers have struggled so that their sons could have a better life. But today, millions of American men garden. And they do so for many reasons.

TO RECAPTURE THE PAST. Many men garden to satisfy an urge to return to the solid ground of childhood, when life was simple and Dad had all the answers. In the garden it's easy to let go of current problems and fall into the comfort of the past. The warm, wet soil smells the same as it did thirty years ago. The freshly picked green beans still taste like the ones picked from Dad's garden. These guys' gardens tend to be filled with old-fashioned plants in long straight rows.

TO SATISFY THE NEED FOR ORDER. Gardens are predictable. We know the grass needs mowing every week. We know the hedge needs trimming monthly. We know the tomatoes will ripen in ninety days. We can be certain the Japanese beetles will find the roses. Some men take comfort in that predictability. Their landscapes are often marked by neatly trimmed lawns and weed-free flower beds.

TO CONTROL. Sometimes we feel as if our lives are spinning out of control. But in the garden we can take control. We can cut the trees into weird shapes. We can blast the bugs when they dare to attack our prized plants. We can water and feed to make them grow. And we can yank out every single weed that dares to invade our plot. In short, we can become the masters of our back-yard universe.

TO PROVIDE A PLACE TO PLAY. As we grow older, our playgrounds disappear. Our lives fill up with work and duty, and time for relaxation diminishes. For many men, the garden is the only place to putter, play with tools, put together projects. These guys often fill their gardens with toys, sports courts, or whimsical yard art.

TO ESCAPE. These days most of us spend our lives surrounded by steel and asphalt, cut off from nature by sealed windows. The garden is one of the few places that allows us an escape, where we can come face to face with nature, even if it's in the form of hybridized, domesticated plants. Guys who garden to get back in touch with nature often choose native plants for their gardens.

TO MAKE A MARK. Even to this day, the interior of the house is likely to be a woman's domain. A man may not

have much to say about the style of the curtains or bedding. But outdoors a guy can decide what to plant around the deck or how short to trim the flowering shrubs. He can plant trees, carve beds out of the lawn, or grow giant pumpkins. In short, he can make the garden his own outdoor room.

TO SATISFY A COMPULSION. In some cases, a man just gets carried away. He spots a certain plant and it speaks to him. He discovers a particular gardening style that resonates deep within him. Before he knows it, his yard is overrun with cactuses or palms or some other plant that inspires his passion. Often he can't even explain why he collects the plant. He only knows he has to.

TO CREATE. Some men need to shape the world around them, even if it's only a small part of the world. They seize the opportunity to move dirt, dig holes, change views, and create their own sanctuary.

In the end, there may be as many reasons to garden and as many gardening styles as there are gardeners. On the pages that follow, you'll visit a few outstanding and diverse gardens created and maintained by men. There are vegetable gardens, flower gardens, small gardens, grand gardens. They have little in common, except that each one satisfies a particular man's passion. Each is a perfectly realized example of what that man thinks a garden should be.

THE MANIACAL COLLECTOR

RALPH VELEZ

WESTMINSTER, CALIFORNIA

FOR MANY MEN, the garden is a place to hide. That seems to be true for Ralph Velez of Westminster, California. It's easy to get literally lost in his yard, because this suburban lot is a jungle crammed with towering palm trees and an understory of other tropical plants.

Ralph Velez, a New York City transplant blooming in southern California, has created an awe-inspiring collection of palms. He has 483 of them growing—no, not just growing, thriving—on a 60-by-150-foot corner lot. He hasn't done it the easy way, planting hundreds of specimens of a common species such as the royal palm. No, his collection comprises 370 different species: royal palm, queen palm, fishtail palm, coconut palm, potato-chip palm. It is one of the three largest private palm collections in the United States. And it looks great! No ragtag bunch of plants, it is a subtropical landscape surrounding, and sometimes overrunning, the home where he and his wife, Nilda, live.



The slow-growing triangle palm, *Dypsis decaryi*, a native of Madagascar, has a place of honor in front of the Velez house.

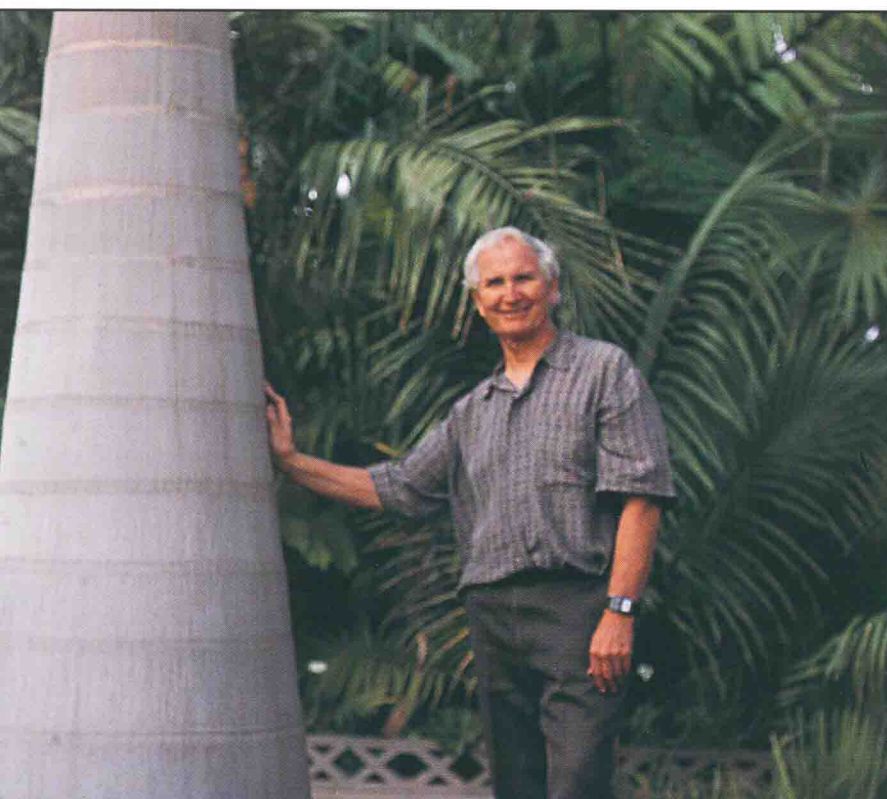
Why has this high school art teacher devoted the past twenty years of his life to these plants? Perhaps because he knows how: his landscape represents his accomplishments grown huge. Palms germinated from tiny seeds or purchased as 99-cent plants now tower over the neighborhood. He sees them every day, as do his neighbors and his wife. Even though she doesn't share his passion, she can't deny that he has succeeded.

Sometimes a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, even if his helpmate does not share his passion. Perhaps that's part of the attraction. Maybe a man wouldn't be so feverish about his garden if he had to share it with his partner, maybe he embraces this obsession because it is his alone.

It separates him from her, allows him his own world, and ultimately permits him to defy her in a harmless little way. Because she makes it clear, in no uncertain terms, that she thinks his passion is ridiculous.

No suburban landscape could make more of a personal statement than Ralph Velez's. You can spot his "garden" from blocks away. A dozen royal palm trees tower over everything in the neighborhood. Just point your car in that direction, and you'll find the Velez house. Well, you won't find the house right away because it's completely hidden by the plants.

Nilda thinks the house may be a little *too* easy to find. Ever since they were featured in a newspaper article and on a TV program, curious gardeners have made their way to the house in a steady stream. That's why you'll see "Keep Out" signs on the garage. It's not that the Velezes aren't friendly. It's not that they don't appreciate the atten-



(Left) Ralph's collection of hundreds of palms has outgrown his own yard, so he plants some, like this *Roystonea oleracea*, a royal palm from Jamaica, in his neighbors' yards.

(Above) You can spot Ralph's place from miles away. Just look for the 70-foot-tall Mexican fan palms. Ralph bought six of them in one-gallon containers and planted them in 1983.

tion of plant lovers. It's just that visitors arrive day and night, expecting a personal tour of the grounds. "Enough is enough," says Nilda.

Those who are invited in have a treat in store. Ralph is eager and excited to show off his love, and Nilda, despite her lack of enthusiasm for the plants, is a gracious hostess. They gladly take the time to chat over tea and cookies before leading the nickel tour of the grounds.

On the back patio, sitting deep in the shade of the palm jungle, you can easily forget that you are surrounded by

houses. The yard wasn't always like this. Once there were other plants here, and a lawn that flowed into the neighbor's lawn. There were even some fruit trees once upon a time.

Velez, a slight, wiry man with thinning white hair and an ever-present smile, came to gardening late. He grew up in an apartment in Queens, the son of an immigrant from Puerto Rico. (If you listen carefully you can still hear a New York accent when he gets excited.) There really was zero gardening in that household. But Ralph was fascinated by the tropics, by "jungle plants," by stories his father told him about Puerto Rico.

"Growing up I never did any gardening," Velez says. But he remembers his first plant, which he and Nilda brought back from their honeymoon in Puerto Rico. "It was an *Areca* palm," he explains, "very common in the tropics. I wanted to bring it home, but I was told you can't take soil. So I washed all the soil off and brought it back in a plastic bag with water. At home I potted it up and we had it in our house on Long Island." That was about the extent of Ralph's gardening in New York. "Even though we had a house with a yard, I still didn't do much planting. Eventually the neighbors complained because I never planted the back yard. I was really busy. I planted the front and that was it."

One problem was the New York climate. After Velez visited Puerto Rico, he realized that he wanted to live in a climate that was at least semitropical. He and Nilda thought

about Miami, Puerto Rico, and Arizona before settling on southern California.

They bought a house on a corner lot in Westminster, and Ralph started landscaping. "When we found this lot, the house was just being built," he explains. "We moved in in February or March, and once it stopped raining there was mud everywhere. But I started planting. I put in a lawn in the front [now gone]. I put a lawn in the back [gone]. We put in apricots, oranges, avocados [all gone, replaced by palms]. I purchased some ferns and philodendrons [a few still remain in the shadow of palms]. But it wasn't long before I started going directly toward palms."

He soon realized that the other plants were taking up space that could be devoted to palms. He wanted enough palms to cover the ground, hide the house, and create a tropical feel.

He remembers the moment when he (and his wife) real-

There's barely enough room to squeeze a car into the driveway between palms, including the Mexican Bahia palm, right.

